

Thos Jackson

SERMONS

ON THE

FOLLOWING SUBJECTS,

V I Z.

Of the universal sense of good and evil.

The characters of the righteous and good man compared; or benevolence the noblest branch of social virtue.

The perfection of the Christian scheme of benevolence; in answer to the objection from its not having particularly recommended private friendship, and the love of our country.

Of the image of God in man; or the excellency of human nature.

God not an arbitrary being.

Of the abuses of free-thinking.

Of Mysteries.

Agur's prayer; or the middle condition of life, generally, the most eligible.

The mischiefs of slavish complaisance, and cowardice.

Rules for the profitable reading the Holy Scriptures.

Of Heresy.

Of Schism.

Of the pleasures of a religious life.

Religion founded on reason, and the right of private judgment.

The evidence of a future state, on the principles of reason and revelation, distinctly consider'd.

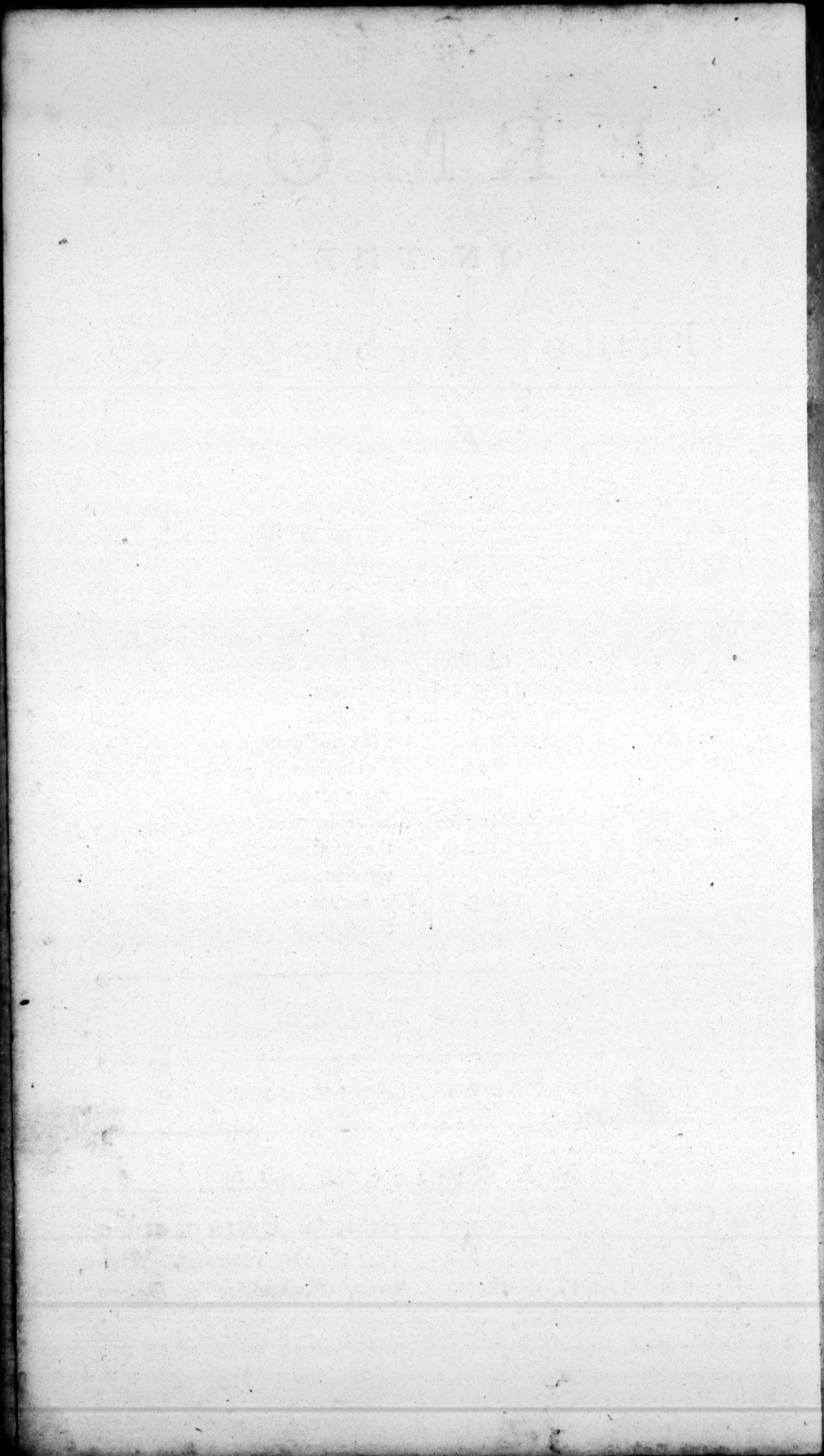
The nature, folly, and danger of Scoffing at religion.

By JAMES FOSTER.

THE FOURTH EDITION.

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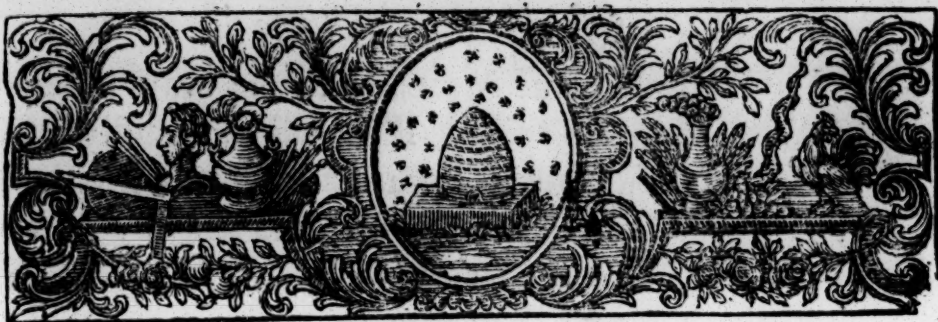
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S E R M O N



SERMON I.

Of the universal sense of good and evil.

ACTS xxiv. 25.

And as he reasoned of righteousness, temperance and judgment to come, Felix trembled.----



TH E R E is nothing more useful and instructive than to acquaint ourselves with the history of mankind, especially in their moral conduct: This gives us a true knowledge of human nature, of the various workings of its passions, and the principles by which it is influenced. And observations grounded on *fact* are certain and indisputable; whereas *abstract speculations* may not only differ very much, but are liable to be disputed, and more easily perplexed or evaded. Besides, a small piece of history affords a greater variety of incidents for the improvement of our minds, and the right conduct of life, than can be suggest-

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I.

S E R M. ed, within the same compass, in the way of *instruction* and *reasoning*: This will more fully appear by considering the particular transaction between *Paul* and *Felix*, of which the text is a part.

Joseph.
Ant. l.
xx. c. 5.

Felix *, by the confession of *Tacitus* the *Roman* historian, govern'd the *Jews* in a very arbitrary manner, and committed the grossest acts of *oppression* and *tyranny*. And *Drusilla* his wife, without any good reason to justify a divorce, had left her former husband, and given herself to him; and consequently was an *adulteress*: When *St. Paul*, therefore, was sent for to explain to them the nature of the *Christian Religion*, which was then newly published, and, upon that account, a matter of *curiosity*; and in discoursing on the morality of the gospel, which is the most important and essential part of it (as it must be of every revelation that is really of divine original) took occasion to inculcate the eternal laws of justice, and the immutable obligations of temperance and chastity; the conscience of the governor was alarmed and terrified, and a sense of his crime, and dread of the righteous and awful judgment of God upon all such notorious offenders against the rules of *righteousness* and *humanity*, filled him with the utmost confusion. *Drusilla* indeed does not appear to have discovered any remorse; perhaps she was, naturally, of a more hard, insensible, unrelenting temper; or confided in her *Jewish* privileges, and expected to be saved, as a daughter of *Abra-*

* Claudius defunctis regibus, Judæam provinciam equitibus Romanis aut libertis permisit; è quibus Antonius Felix, per omnem sævitiam ac libidinem, jus regium servili ingenio exercuit, *Histor. lib. v. c. 9.*

At non frater ejus cognomento *Felix* pari moderatione agebat, jam pridem Judææ impositus, & cuncta malefacta sibi impune ratus, tanta potentia subnixo. *Annal. xii. 54.*

ham, notwithstanding the immorality and wickedness of her life. However this be, as 'tis not my business to make conjectures, I shall proceed to consider what is directly related by the historian, viz. that, as Paul *reasoned of righteousness, temperance, and judgment to come*, Felix trembled: Only premising, that the impression, which the Apostle's discourse made upon his mind, did not spring from any thing in his *peculiar* circumstances, but from the *general frame* of human nature, and principles that are common to all mankind; and consequently that the moral reflections, naturally arising from it, must be of *universal* concern. And,

1st. We learn from this history, that there is, even in the worst of men, a *natural conscience* of good and evil, which in very few, if any, instances, is intirely extinguished. It may be darkened, perverted, and very much defaced, but is hardly ever quite obliterated and lost. There are certain seasons, which check the insolence of the passions, and dispose for gravity and consideration, in which it *revives*; and represents the malignity of irregular and vitious excesses in a clear and strong light.

Indeed the advocates for vice and licentiousness have, some times, gone so far, as to represent all our notions of right and wrong as the effects of *education, custom, superstition*, and the like; but this evidently shews, that they are men of very little knowledge of human nature; and of narrow observation: For let them fix on any instance of real and undoubted superstition they please, and let them examine all ages, and histories; and they will never find, tho' it was ever so plausible, and

S E R M. managed with the utmost art and dexterity, that
 I. it had such a *steady* and *universal* influence as notions of morality. The *weak* and *unthinking*, and persons of a *suspicious*, *gloomy* temper, may be persuaded to look upon it as sacred, and drawn into a stiff attachment to it; but the more *judicious* have secretly despis'd it; and it was never known to take, universally, as a thing of real excellency and importance in itself, with men of all *capacities*, *inclinations* and *interests*.

Again, by the use of proper arguments, a man may convince great multitudes of the absurdity and folly of any *established superstition*, and form a strong party against it; but let him use the utmost sophistry to confound all distinction between *virtue* and *vice*, to prove that there is no difference between just and unjust, beneficence and cruelty, that fraud and oppression, adultery and murder, have nothing criminal in them, but what is owing to the *arbitrary* determination of the world, or the juggles of *priests* and *politicians*; let him attempt, I say, to establish so monstrous a scheme with ever so much craft and subtilty he will make but few profelytes; nay, nor even be able to impose on himself so far, however he may perplex and puzzle his understanding, as to be firmly establish'd in such a wild opinion, without having, at any time, *uneasy suspicions*, and some mixtures of *jealousy* and *distrust*.

Add to this, that the *wisest*, in all ages, those who have discovered the greatest strength and compass of reason, have had the most large and refined sentiments of morality, and urged the strictest regard to it in all its parts. And finally, that those who differed most about external rites,
 and

and particular forms of superstition, have *unanimously* agreed in asserting the sacredness of moral obligations, and in all the essential and momentous branches of virtue. All which, taken together, is the strongest presumption imaginable, that the universal sense of good and evil, which appears among mankind, is a *natural* principle; and has not its foundation in *fancy* and *enthusiasm*.

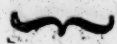
S E R M.
I.
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But to come more directly to the point. All the obligations of morality approve themselves, upon examination, to our best and purest reason: And this *single* circumstance proves, undeniably, that they spring from the nature of things; that whereas it holds true of all kinds of superstition, that they will not stand an exact and critical enquiry, are best liked when they are least understood, most successfully propagated in times of ignorance and implicit faith, and lose ground in more judicious and inquisitive ages; the quite contrary may be said of the rules of virtue, which, the more narrowly they are canvassed, their authority appears by so much the more unquestionable: The mind, the more it considers and argues about them, is the more fully convinced of their importance. Nothing does the cause of virtue so much service, or makes it appear with such dignity and lustre, as bringing it to the test of a good understanding: as an evidence of which, it has, in fact, been always most cultivated, and held in highest esteem, in the most *knowing* and *civilized* nations, where those ingenious and liberal arts, which adorn and polish human life, have flourished in their greatest perfection.

But even this is not all. For because the decisions of reason are *slow*, formed by a train of deductions

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I.



ductions and inferences, which all are not equally capable of; and if notions of morality were only to be acquired this way, the good effect would too frequently be obstructed by various causes, preventing the right exercise of our rational faculties, in some by *the cares of life*, in others by *indolence*; upon these accounts, I say, there seems to be implanted in our nature a kind of *sense* of good and evil, an *immediate perception*, without any intervening train of reasoning, of the amiableness and beauty of virtue and the deformity of vice. And this I take to be what is most properly meant by *natural conscience*; which however it may be corrupted and obscured by sensual passions, and, for a time, controuled by strong prejudices, and inveterate habits of vice, the worst of men can't entirely get rid of. And, undoubtedly, it is an excellent provision of the God of nature, and an undeniable proof of his wisdom and goodness in the formation of mankind; not only as 'tis a constant incentive to honourable, virtuous, and useful actions, and a more *expeditious, universal, and vigorous* principle than the mere cool and abstract dictates of reason; but as it may always be a means of reforming offenders, and does not leave their recovery *quite desperate*, tho' they have gone great lengths in vice and disorder; or, at least, in many cases, checks the irregular excesses of their passions, and *limits* their extravagancies, which might, otherwise, occasion greater confusion in the world, and be much more injurious to the general interests of societies.

I shall only add, that as it appears, from the example in the text, that bad men are sometimes struck with terror on account of their vices, and
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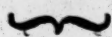
fully convinced of their unreasonable nature, and pernicious consequences, but soon wear off the impression, and continue their evil practices without being at all reformed; we learn from hence, how strangely a course of habitual wickedness *captivates* and *enslaves* the mind: It is held in such strong fetters, that the sinner has not resolution enough to return to the paths of virtue, tho' reason and interest both demand it; nor to abandon his vices, notwithstanding he is persuaded that they are a source of reproach and dishonour, and have a direct tendency to misery and ruin. Such a state of servitude, in which our *noblest* faculties, our *intellectual* and *moral* powers, are entirely subjected to sense and appetite, is the lowest and most melancholy depravation of human nature; most *ignominious* in itself, and *fatal* in its effects.

2dly. We may observe, from the text, what a miserable thing it is to have a conscience burthened with guilt, in that a man dares not trust himself *to think*, for fear of being alarmed, and filled with terror and confusion. *Felix* does not seem to have been at all prone to superstition; or, in general, to have had any troublesome sense of his crimes. The flatteries of a court, and the amusements of grandeur and luxury, gave him no time to cool; and diverted all grave and serious reflections. But when *St. Paul* began to discourse to him of the immutable obligations of justice, against which he had been a most heinous offender, he immediately saw the vileness of his conduct, and *trembled* for the consequences of it.

And the case is very much the same with such as indulge to any other kind of vitious excess. As long as they are amus'd with company, or engag'd

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gag'd in a hurry of business, or can keep their passions inflam'd, and silence the voice of reason and natural conscience by a course of intemperance, they may continue *stupid* and *insensible*. But when any thing happens that damps their gaiety, gives a shock to the mind, and puts them upon thinking, they are soon rows'd out of their *lethargy* and entertain'd with none but *dark* and *gloomy* prospects. And nothing, surely, can be a more perverted state of mankind, than to derive all their relief all their peace, from the *suppression* or *extinction* of reason; not to be able to stand the deliberate judgment of their own minds, or bear those exercises of sedate and impartial reflection, which are their peculiar glory and happiness. Besides, as guilt is such an enemy to *consideration*, there is this dreadful circumstance attending it farther to aggravate and enhance its misery, that it cuts off, in a great measure, *the only possible means* of the sinners recovery.

3dly. It is a very natural inference from the text, that inculcating the great duties of morality, and enforcing the practice of them from a regard to the future judgment, is true *Gospel preaching*; and answers, in the most effectual manner, the excellent design of Christianity. Indeed the reason of the thing itself demonstrates, that to promote universal purity, and strengthen the obligations of virtue, which are eternal and immutable, a conformity to the moral perfections of God, and the supreme rectitude and happiness of human nature, must be the ultimate view of every divine revelation. Without this, *faith* is no better than *infidelity*, nor *orthodoxy* than *error*; and external rites and solemnities of devotion, however dignified by *civil* or *ecclesiastical* authority,
or

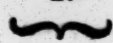
or even by a *divine* appointment, if they are con- sider'd as having an intrinsic goodness, and substituted in the room of the virtues of a holy life, are so far from being parts of *true religion*, that they degenerate into acts of the most vile and impious *superstition*. And therefore if Christianity had, really, subverted, in any instance, the religion of nature, or depretiated any essential branches of morality : nay, indeed, if it had not represented them as of the first importance to mankind, infinitely preferable to *speculations, mysteries*, and alterable *forms* and *modes* of worship ; notwithstanding the *pomp* of miracles, it would hardly have prov'd itself, to a wise and judicious inquirer, worthy of God, or useful to the world.

To PREACH CHRIST is universally allowed to be the duty of every Christian minister.

But what doth it mean? — 'Tis not to use his name as a charm, to work up our hearers to a warm pitch of *enthusiasm*, without any foundation of reason to support it. — 'Tis not to make his person and his offices incomprehensible. — 'Tis not to exalt *his* glory, as a kind condescending favour, to the dishonour of the supreme and unlimited goodness of the *creator* and *father* of the universe ; who is represented as stern and inexorable, expressing no indulgence to his guilty creatures, but demanding full and rigorous satisfaction for their offences. — 'Tis not to encourage *undue* and *presumptuous* reliances on his merits and intercession, to the contempt of virtue and good works. No : But to represent him as a *law-giver* as well as a favour, as a *preacher of righteousness*, as one who hath given us a most noble and complete system of morals, enforc'd by the most substantial

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tial and worthy motives; and to shew, that the whole scheme of our redemption is *a doctrine according to godliness*.

That this is *preaching Christ* is evident, beyond all reasonable dispute, from the text, and the verse immediately preceding, where we are told, that Felix *sent for Paul, and heard him concerning the faith of Christ; and as, i. e. in explaining the faith, or doctrine, of Christ, he reason'd of righteousness, temperance, and judgment to come, Felix trembled*. And this method bears the nearest conformity to our saviour's own example, whose whole sermon on the mount, the longest he ever preach'd, is entirely taken up in recommending *moral* duties; and the drift of, almost, all his parables is either to inculcate, in general, honesty and integrity of mind, or urge the practice of particular virtues, or discountenance and restrain prevailing and destructive vices. The sum of our duty, in the opinion of this divine instructor, consists in the *love of God, and of our neighbour*; and according to St. James, *pure religion and undefil'd, before God, even the Father, is this, to visit the fatherless and widows in their affliction, and to keep himself unspotted from the world*. So that all those who decry moral virtue, which is the supreme dignity of God himself, and inseparably connected with the happiness of all rational beings, as a thing of no avail towards obtaining the divine favour, and the privileges and rewards of christianity, do, *in effect*, (tho', I am persuaded with a quite different design, even to exalt, instead of diminishing, the honour of the gospel) subvert the very fundamental principles both of natural and reveal'd religion.

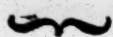
And

And from what has been said it appears, that to explain and press the eternal laws of morality is not only a truly Christian, but, beyond comparison, the most *useful* method of preaching. In this I include enforcing the rules of virtue by all the *peculiar* motives which the Christian religion suggests; and making all its doctrines subservient to holiness. There is a passage, in St. Paul's epistle to *Titus*, very particu'ar, and strong to this purpose; *this is a faithful saying, and these things I will that thou affirm constantly, that they who have believ'd in God might be careful to maintain good works; these things are good and profitable to men.* They are of *invariable* importance; of *universal* advantage; and tend to advance the highest interests of human nature in all ages, nations, and circumstances; and under every possible denomination and form of true religion. To cultivate in the minds of men a supreme reverence and love of God, and promote the mutual exercise of strict impartial justice, generous and extensive benevolence, meekness and condescension, peaceableness and humility, and a strict regard to all the rules of chastity and temperance, is to make them most amiable in themselves, useful to society, and the favourites of heaven.

But of what advantage is it to set faith and reason at variance, and lay more stress on *believing right*, which is a qualification the most profligate and abandon'd may attain to (nay even *the devils believe and tremble*) than on purity of heart, and righteousness of life? — Of what advantage is it to magnify the *grace* of God, by disparaging and vilifying human nature, which is the *work* of God; by representing mankind as having lost their

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their noble powers of reason and liberty, and, consequently, being altogether as incapable of religion as the brute creatures? — What *end* does it answer to wrap religion up in *darkness*, and lay a great stress on the *incomprehensible subtleties* of *school-divinity*, but to confound weak understandings, make the ignorant conceited and censorious, and foment a spirit of uncharitableness and party-zeal? — What is the *use* of insisting on absolute and irreversible decrees, but to encourage *presumption*, or drive to *despair*? — Or in fixing the whole of our salvation on the righteousness of another imputed to us, and giving a despicable representation of the most exalted human virtues, unless it be to mortify the *best* of men, and slacken their diligence and zeal, and flatter the very *worst* in their vices?

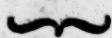
I may add to what has been already said, that not only the recommending and inculcating, but *reasoning* about points of morality is of singular advantage, and the very best way to propagate the knowledge and practice of Christianity. Of this we have a plain example in the conduct of St. *Paul*, who is describ'd, in the text, as *reasoning*, with *Felix*, of *righteousness*, *temperance*, and *judgment* to come. And indeed, the more of *reason* there appears in our religion, the brighter are the internal characters of its divine original. Men will be the more strongly dispos'd to obey it, when they are convinc'd that 'tis not impos'd by a mere *arbitrary* authority, but is excellent in itself, and conducive to their happiness. Besides, by this method we shall represent our duty in a greater variety of lights, to strike every passion, and suit it

it to all tempers and circumstances. So that what-
 ever will not stand the test of free argument and
 inquiry can't be the religion of reasonable beings,
 nor proceed from a wise and beneficent gover-
 nour; but is fit only for a TYRANT to enjoin,
 and SLAVES to submit to.

S E R M.
 I.


4. A sense of guilt makes those things the ob-
 jects of *aversion* and *horror*, which, naturally,
 yield the highest delight and satisfaction. We
 have an instance, in the text, of one that was
 shock'd at the strict obligations of *justice*, with-
 out which there can be no pleasure, or conveni-
 ence in human life, and the whole frame of civil
 societies must, immediately, be dissolv'd. It
 mortifies the epicure and the adulterer to be told
 of the rules of *temperance* and *chastity*, which are
 absolutely necessary to the health of our bodies,
 the rectitude and vigour of our minds, and the
 grand security of what is most dear and sacred to
 us; and the cruel and revengeful to hear of *gentle-
 ness*, *beneficence*, and the soft impressions of *hu-
 manity*, tho' they form the most excellent and ami-
 able character we can possibly conceive of. Could
 we find a being, *originally*, form'd with such ap-
 prehensions of things, we should look upon it
 with detestation, and universally abhor the author
 of such a vile production. But yet our passions
 and prejudices so strangely deceive us, that we
 think more favourably of the pursuits of vice,
 which create many such MONSTERS; who
 would be glad to prove that the distinctions of
 good and evil were *fantastic* and *arbitrary*, and
 virtue and vice *mere empty names*; and, thereby,
 destroy

S E R M. destroy the order and beauty of the whole moral
I. creation of God.



In like manner, the future judgment of mankind is, in itself, far from being an object of *terror*. For that we are moral accountable creatures is owing to our superior capacities, which are the distinguishing honour and dignity of our nature; and nothing can be a more comfortable reflection to a well-dispos'd mind, than that its integrity will be tried and rewarded by a being of unerring wisdom, inflexible justice, and unlimited goodness. But, to a guilty sinner, this is so tremendous a scene, that the mere prospect of it fills him with agony and confusion. He does not consider it as *honourable* to human nature, because it threatens his vices; can't think of abiding by the sentence of *unchangeable rectitude*, and *infinite benevolence* itself; and the sum of his wishes is *to die like a brute*. The future judgment is not reveal'd with a view to *alarm* and *confound* the mind, but to restrain those irregular practices, which are the surest ground of melancholy suspicions, and inward horror.

Let men, therefore, but abandon their vices, their impiety and injustice, revenge and cruelty, sensuality and intemperance, and endeavour to resemble God in purity, righteousness, and beneficence, and then they may always think of him with pleasure, as the compassionate father, the righteous and merciful governor of mankind, who delights in the happiness of his children and subjects: Nay, they may even expect, with joy, the time when they shall appear before his impartial tribunal, when justice will be temper'd with clemency, and all reasonable allowances made both
for

for particular circumstances, and for the general S E R M.
weakness and frailty of human nature ; and when *the* I.
judge of all the earth, who must of necessity do
right, shall render indignation and wrath, tribu- Rom. ii.
lation and anguish, upon every soul of man that doth 8,9, 10.
evil, but glory, honour, and peace to every man that
worketh good — God grant that we may all have
confidence, and not be askam'd before him at his
coming.



S E R M O N II.

The characters of the righteous and good man compared ; or benevolence the noblest improvement of social virtue.

R O M. v. 7.

For scarcely for a righteous man will one die; yet, peradventure, for a good man some would even dare to die.

S E R M.
II.

IN the verse preceding the text, the Apostle mentions that great instance of the love of God, in sending his son into the world to die for us, which is the peculiar discovery of the gospel, and deserves our highest admiration and gratitude; *for when we were yet without strength, in due time Christ died for the ungodly.* The goodness of God, in this wonderful constitution, is celebrated, in the new Testament, with the most lofty encomiums. There is an uncommon stress and emphasis laid upon it; *God so lov'd the world, &c. and herein is love, that he gave his son to be the propitiation for our sins.* It vastly surpasses the most noble and heroic instances of human benevolence and friendship. For, amongst men, there is scarce one

John iii.
16.

1 John iv.
10.

one to be met with, that will die for a person who is strictly *just* and *righteous*; and 'tis very rare and extraordinary to find any that will lay down their lives even for a *charitable beneficent* man, *peradventure for a good man some would even dare to die*; but God commendeth his love towards us, in that while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us. This is the immediate connection of the words, which I shall consider, in what follows, as an independent proposition: And grounding my discourse entirely on the observation St. Paul has made, that mankind have a much greater esteem of kind and generous than of merely just actions, shall endeavour to shew, that this is not owing to *education, fancy, and enthusiasm*, but founded on *right reason*, and a true judgment of the intrinsic nature and differences of things. In order to this, I shall,

- I. Give a short sketch of the characters of the *righteous* and *good* man.
- II. Shew the vastly superior excellency of the latter. And
- III. Make some useful observations on the whole.

1st. I am to give a short sketch of the characters of a *righteous* and *good* man. There is a general view in which righteousness and goodness have exactly the same signification, and denote the practice of every thing that is essentially right and good. And as, in this large and extensive sense, they both comprehend all moral virtues, goodness, or benevolence, must be included in righteousness, as justice is included in goodness even in its most restrain'd sense. But, besides

S E R M. this, the words have a more limited meaning. In
 II. the Scriptures, and in all other writings, righteousness frequently signifies the particular virtue of justice; and it would be easy to shew likewise, that goodness, in very many passages of the new Testament, is the same with kindness, generosity, and charity. I shall mention but two which are indisputable; *is thine eye evil because I am good?*
 Mat. xx. and again, *be not overcome of evil, but overcome*
 15. *evil with good.* And there can be no doubt whether we must understand St. Paul thus, when he
 Rom. xii. speaks, in the text, of the *righteous* and *good* man,
 21. because they are distinguish'd from each other.

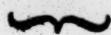
But it may be asked, can a man, in any sense, be strictly just that is not good — Are not his good offices *due* to his fellow creatures; I answer, that those who are in distress have, unquestionably, a *right* to be reliev'd, founded on reason, on common ties of humanity, and the mutual dependence of mankind upon one another. This right, however, is only *general*. It does not, in most cases, give them a claim to assistance and support from any particular persons; but men are at liberty to chuse the objects towards whom to exercise their charity, as their own judgment and prudence directs, and he that is neglected may have no reason to complain of a real injury done him. Whereas justice is an *immediate* demand that one man has upon another. 'Tis a demand of something *fix'd* and *certain*, which is not the case in acts of charity, the fitness of which, with respect to particular persons, and consequently our claims from them, depend on a variety of circumstances that can't always be adjusted, and very often, perhaps, are not proper to be known. So
 that

that tho' he who has it in his power to do many services for his fellow-creatures, which his circumstances and station in life plainly direct to, but neglects to perform them, either thro' indolence, or an hard unrelenting insensible temper; tho' such a one, I say, may in a more general sense be said to be *unjust*, because he does not that good which the necessities of others call for, and which may fairly be expected from him; yet it appears, from what has been said, that there is some ground for the distinction made, in the text, between the *righteous* and *good* man, and we shall be able the more easily to delineate their respective characters.

The *just* man, then, punctually answers all the particular demands that can be made upon him, and renders unto every man what he can exactly and precisely prove to be his due; not upon a *general* right of claim in which others are equally concern'd, but due *immediately* from himself. He is fair and honest in his dealings, true to his promises, nor does any man a direct injury. He will neither defame and blacken his reputation, nor oppress him by open violence, nor circumvent and deceive him by secret fraud. He will not abuse the confidence that is reposed in him, nor take advantage of his neighbour's ignorance to do him a prejudice. And as he is careful to do to others every thing that, in *strict equity*, he is obliged to do, he *rigorously* insists on his due from them; and if he can't be charg'd with *down-right injustice*, imagines that this is all that can be expected from him, and concerns himself about nothing farther. I have stated the matter thus, because if I should suppose him to recede from his strict right, and make favourable abate-

S E R M.

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ments and allowances, it would confound his character with that of the beneficent or generous man, from which, the apostle's argument, in the text, requires it should be kept entirely distinct.

But now the *good* man goes far beyond this. He makes the interest of mankind, in a manner, his own, and has a tender and affectionate concern for their welfare. He can't think himself happy, whatever his possessions and enjoyments are, while he sees others miserable. His wealth and affluence delight him chiefly as the poor and indigent are the better for it; and the greatest charm of prosperity is the opportunity it affords of relieving his fellow creatures, and being more extensively useful. He thinks he has discharg'd but *the least part* of his duty, when he has done strict justice to all; and therefore the communicating advice and comfort, assistance and support, according to the various exigencies of those with whom he converses, is his constant endeavour, and most pleasing entertainment. In the strong and elegant language of *Job*, he is *eyes to the blind, and feet to the lame, he delivereth the poor that cry, and the fatherless, and him that hath none to help him; the blessing of him that is ready to perish cometh upon him, and he causeth the widows heart to sing for joy.* And that he may practise the more large and generous charity, he retrenches useless pomp and extravagance, and by a regular and prudent management, constantly provides for the Relief of the necessitous; esteeming this a much more sublime and noble gratification, than the idle amusements and gallantries of a vain and luxurious age. *A good man, saith the Psalmist,*
sheweth

Job. xxix.

12, 13,

15.

Pf. cxii. 5.

showeth favour and lendeth; he will guide his affairs with discretion. S E R M. II.

Again, he not only takes all occasions, that present themselves, of doing good, but seeks for opportunities to be useful; 'tis part of the stated employment and business of his life. He contrives and studies which way he may be most serviceable to his fellow-creatures, and what that particular talent is, with which he is entrusted for the good of mankind. If it be *power*, he protects and encourages virtue by his authority and influence, is the patron of liberty, and vindicates the cause of oppress'd innocence: if *riches*, he is *rich in good works, ready to distribute, willing to communicate*: if *knowledge*, he counts it his highest pleasure to instruct the ignorant, and administer proper direction and comfort in perplexing and difficult circumstances, and to defend the cause of religion, and represent it in a just and amiable light. And to nothing of this does he want to be *solicited*, but his generous heart is always ready, and strongly disposed for beneficent designs and actions. You can't lay a greater obligation upon him than by proposing ways in which he may be useful, or enlarge his sphere of usefulness: For this is the point in which all his views, all his desires, all his satisfaction, center.

Add to this, that he is inclined to abate of his right, when insisting too strictly upon it may have the appearance of harshness and severity; and has such a strong sense of benevolence, such an exalted spirit of humanity and compassion, that no considerations of *private interest*, no difference of *nation or religious profession* can restrain; and which the *greatest injuries* cannot bear down and extinguish.

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guish. He aims that his goodness may be as *diffusive* as possible, and as much like that of the universal parent, the supreme and eternal fountain of good, who supports, enlivens, and recreates the whole creation; and therefore, as he is generous in all his designs, he is very fearful of disobliging any either by word, or action, and endeavours, in the whole of his conduct, to be agreeable as well as useful to all; being candid in his censures, practising to his inferiors the most endearing condescension, and carefully avoiding moroseness, and every thing that has the appearance of insolence and contempt. Finally, that I may conclude the sketch, which I design'd, of this most beautiful and honourable character, the *good* man is unwearied in his endeavours to promote the happiness of others; the ardour of his benevolence is not cool'd tho' he meets with ungrateful returns; the trouble and expence of the service don't discourage him; nay, he is ready to give up all private considerations for the sake of the public welfare, and even to sacrifice *life itself*, when the good of the world requires it. This shall suffice for the first head: I proceed now,

To shew, **SECONDLY**, the superior excellency of the *good* man's character to that of the *merely righteous*, or just man. An attempt of this kind must, I am persuaded, be thought almost needless, after what has been already said. For the placing the two characters, truly drawn, in the same point of view, that they may be fairly consider'd and compared together, will so strongly illustrate the beauty of the beneficent character, that the other will be look'd upon as a foil to set it off to the greater advantage, and perhaps not be

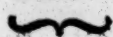
be regarded and valued as it ought. And as the S E R M.
 mind of man is so framed, as immediately to pre- II.
 fer generous beneficence to strict and rigid justice, 
 there is the more difficulty in enlarging here; be-
 cause there is scarce a medium of proof to be
 found, that is clearer than the thing itself at first
 sight. The truth appears at once, upon compar-
 ing our ideas; and in all cases which are so plain,
 and, in a manner, self-evident, 'tis sufficient to
 appeal to the reason and common sense of man-
 kind; and very difficult to argue in such a way,
 as not to perplex and darken the subject. How-
 ever, I shall suggest a few things, in which the
 difference of the characters mentioned in the text
 will be readily acknowledged. And

1st. The character of the *good* man is much
 more *amiable* in itself. Justice indeed, so far as
 it goes, is not only an irreproveable character,
 but rational and becoming; but no man will say
 that it has any thing *great* and *generous* in it, be-
 cause 'tis, indeed, the least degree of virtue that
 can be suppos'd in social life. — 'Tis approv'd
 of, but not admir'd — We don't think our-
 selves oblig'd to the person that does it, since
 'tis, really, as little as he can do for us; justice
 being what all have an undoubted right to
 claim — And therefore there is properly no
merit in it, nothing that exalts and *dignifies* a cha-
 racter, because 'tis expected from all who have any
 notion of good and evil, and are not quite lost to
 virtue.

But benevolence, *disinterested*, *generous*, *diffu-*
sive benevolence, is the highest perfection and glo-
 ry of human nature. It argues true greatness of
 mind, and is a virtue that men of mean and nar-
 row

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row spirits cannot practise.—'Tis not only a right, but a *beautiful* character, that charms the beholders, and attracts universal esteem and love. —Even the most dissolute and profligate can't help being struck with it in others, however they may neglect to excel in it themselves. —And the finest and most shining qualities, the most excellent endowments of nature, and highest improvements of art, are *low* and *despicable* in comparison of it, and derive all their *lustre* from it. Without it, riches are *insolent* and *arbitrary*; power is *oppressive* and *tyrannical*; and wisdom mischievous *craft* and *subtilty*, or, at best, vain and useless *ostentation*. —I appeal to the reason of mankind, whether if any one was to form the most lovely and amiable, and at the same time the greatest and most heroic character he could possibly devise, it would not be that of the *generous* and *faithful friend*, the *liberal compassionate benefactor*, the *disinterested* and *noble minded patriot*, who diffuses relief, comfort, and happiness all around him; is enlarg'd beyond mean and selfish views; and considers himself, as a member of the grand community of mankind, born for the general good.

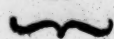
Again, the superior excellence of *goodness* to *justice* is evident from hence, that the latter is necessarily included in the former, as the less in the greater; but without benevolence, justice, instead of being a finished, is a very *defective* character; nay it forms, upon the whole, a bad character, a *little, narrow, selfish* character, that is justly the object of contempt. This will be more fully illustrated by applying it to the supreme being, whom if we suppose to be only just, and not absolutely

solutely and universally benevolent and merciful, we entirely destroy the foundation of those exalted, honourable, and lovely conceptions of him, which wise and thinking men, in all ages, have entertain'd. But his goodness, his unlimited goodness, which is so gloriously displayed in the frame of our own nature, in the whole constitution of things, and the whole course of providence, renders him the worthy object of our trust and confidence, and of our supreme love and delight.

2dly. As the *good* man's character is much more lovely in itself, so is it more *useful* than that of the *merely righteous* or just man. By justice men's properties are, indeed, in a good measure secur'd, and injury and violence, and consequently much confusion and mischief in the world, is prevented; but the greatest part of the true enjoyments of life, of the conveniencies and comforts of it, arise from *benevolence*. Without justice, societies could not subsist; but without benevolence, if they might possibly subsist (which can hardly be imagined) they would infallibly be miserable. Mankind are form'd for society, and, by means of their large and extensive capacities, may be exceedingly useful to each other; but if one were to do for another no more than he could *strictly claim*, very little good would actually be done, and thus the design of their social nature must be defeated, and the present being be extremely uncomfortable. For of the man that is only just the utmost that can, generally, be said is, that he is not a mischievous creature; but he may be *insignificant*, a kind of *blank* in the creation: He does no wrong or injury to any; but then he contributes very little to the positive happiness

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pineness of the world. No: 'tis *generous friendship*, the *tender sympathizing temper*, the *open and liberal heart* that make pleasure circulate, and alleviate the cares of life. And did men, universally, study how to be useful, and practise beneficence in its greatest latitude; were their interests consider'd as dependent upon, and inseparably connected with, each other, and a constant intercourse of good offices maintained among all who are united in the common bonds of humanity; the face of things would be altered unspeakably for the better, and the world be as happy, as the imperfection and frailty, and many unavoidable casualties of the present state will admit of. But mere justice can't introduce any thing like this desirable and delightful scene; and, consequently, is vastly inferior, in respect of real advantage to mankind, to the exercise of benevolence, to which, *partial* and *limited* as it is, the far greatest part of the happiness that is in the world is undeniably owing.

3dly. The *good* man's character is not only more useful than that of the *just* man, but its influence is abundantly more *extensive*. In matters in which *active justice* is concerned, men are, generally, confined to a narrow circle. With regard to those, with whom they have no dealings or commerce, their *justice* amounts to no more in most cases, than not being *unjust*.

But persons of whom we *know nothing*, and with whom we never had *any communication*; persons who are at the *greatest distance* from us; and whom, whether we consider their numbers, the different places of their abode, or the variety of their circumstances, the most remote consequences of

of our *justice* or *injustice* can't be supposed to reach; S E R M.
 may feel the kind effects of our generosity and II.
 compassion. And as its influence is so much wider, and, at the same time, the benefits that accrue to the world by it beyond comparison greater, than can result from the mere exercise of justice, this is a convincing and unanswerable demonstration of its superior excellence. And considering the *vast usefulness* of this virtue, together with its *intrinsic beauty*, 'tis no wonder that it engages the admiration, the affection, and gratitude of mankind to such a degree, that *for a good man some would even dare to die*. There is another thing,

4thly. Which I know not whether it be any ground of the apostle's observation in the text, but yet it deserves to be taken notice of, as it evidently shews the superior excellence of *goodness* to *strict justice*; and that is, that when a man is just, but not benevolent, he can't be supposed to act from a *right principle*.——Not in obedience to *the authority of God*, which would determine *universally*, and not suffer him to neglect one of the most important laws which God hath given to mankind, while he pretends a zeal for another that is of inferior consequence.——Nor from a regard to *the fitness of the thing itself*, because that, likewise, would influence, in a stronger manner, to the exercise of benevolence, which is a much more *exalted* virtue. 'Tis therefore a reasonable presumption, that he is just only from selfish views; at least, he can have but very lame and confused notions of religion and morality, and must proceed upon mean and narrow principles. Whereas, on the contrary, the *good* man, in the utmost

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utmost extent of that character, can't but have the *noblest* views, and an uncommon *generosity* and *greatness* of soul. He imitates the father of the universe, acts from the same sublime motives, and in pursuance of the same most excellent and worthy end. But I can't enlarge on these things, tho' they are of the utmost importance, and the strongest possible recommendation of the good and beneficent character.

Give me leave, however, to make one observation more before I conclude this head, tho' it be of a different kind from the foregoing, and that is, that there is an argument for charity and generous beneficence, suggested in the text, from *private interest*; as it tends to procure universal love and esteem, and powerfully engages our fellow creatures to do good offices for us in circumstances where they are most needed, and even with *inconvenience* and *damage* to themselves. Disinterested kindness and compassion have a natural tendency to soften the *hardest* hearts, and win upon the most *barbarous* and *savage* tempers. The most *vitious* can't think of offering any insult to it without the utmost reluctance; but, where there is a *sense of virtue*, there will be the highest esteem of it. And tho' perhaps, there are very few, who, if matters were driven to that extremity, would really lay down their lives for the most obliging and useful man, yet he would have many friends who would ardently desire his welfare, compassionate and relieve him in his distresses, and chearfully contribute to his happiness. So that *generous benevolence* to mankind is more for our interest, in the present world, than a *churlish sullen* behaviour; and much more than *malice*,
cruelty,

cruelty, and revenge, which render a person despised, or hated, by all. Such an one will, in all probability, be served with regret, be *envied* in his prosperity, and *insulted* in his misery. I shall now conclude with these two reflections.

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1st. We may infer, from what has been said in this discourse, the great wisdom and goodness of God in the frame of human nature; which is so formed, as strongly to approve of kind beneficent actions, even when it has no *particular interest* in them; and has an *immediate abhorrence* of malice and cruelty. Benevolence (as has been shewn) is the chief dignity and glory of mankind, and that virtue on which all the advantages and happiness of social life, in a great measure, depend. The all-wise Creator, therefore, hath graciously provided for it in our very make and constitution; and not only endued us with reason, whereby we are capable of contriving and consulting for the good of others, but planted in us such strong *instincts* and *natural propensions* to kindness and compassion, as can't be over rul'd and extinguished without losing humanity itself; and, by this means, he hath counterballanced the principle of *self-love*, which, were it not for our benevolent affections, would engage us in narrow schemes, and little mean pursuits, inconsistent with the welfare of society, and the general happiness of our fellow-creatures.

2^{dly}. We learn the excellency of the *Christian Religion*, which has carried the noble principle of benevolence to its highest pitch, and improved it to the utmost perfection it is capable of. The whole strain of christianity is love, harmony and peace, condescension and mutual forbearance, tender

S E R M. der mercy and compassion. The charity, which
 II. it recommends, *suffereth long and is kind, envieth not, vaunteth not itself, is not puffed up, doth not behave itself unseemly, seeketh not her own, is not easily provoked, thinketh no evil, rejoiceth not in iniquity, but rejoiceth in the truth, beareth all things, believeth all things, hopeth all things.* — Nay we
 1 Cor. iv. are commanded to be *rich in good works, ready to*
 5, 6, 7. *distribute, willing to communicate;* — and even
 1 Tim. vi. *to lay down our lives for the brethren; walking in*
 18. *love, as Christ also hath loved us, and hath given*
 1 John iii. *himself for us, an offering, and a sacrifice to God*
 16. *for a sweet smelling savour.* — And on this com-
 Eph. v. 2. *mand our Saviour lays a peculiar stress, and makes it the very characteristic of a Christian.*

Our holy religion inculcates farther, not only the most *disinterested* and *generous*, but the most
 Luke iv. *extensive* benevolence; love to A L L M A N-
 55. K I N D, notwithstanding difference of *nation,*
 Chap. x. *religion, interest;* love even to our *enemies, not*
 24, &c. *rendering evil for evil, or railing for railing, but*
 Gal. vi. *contrariwise blessing.* — It gives us frequent assur-
 10. ances, that this virtue is, in a particular manner,
 1 Pet. iii. *pleasing to God, and will entitle us to a most*
 9. *glorious reward.* — It sets before us an example
 Mat. xxv. of it, in our own nature, in the character of *the*
 34, &c. *author and finisher of our faith, who went about*
 2 Cor. ix. *doing good;* and requires, that we look not only on
 6, 7. *our own things, but every man also on the things of*
 Acts x. *others;* and that the same mind be in us which was
 38. *also in Christ Jesus; who, tho' he was in the form of God, — made himself of no reputation, and took on him the form of a servant, and was made in the likeness of men, and being found in fashion as a man, humbled himself, and, to accomplish our salvation,*
 became

became obedient unto death, even the death of the S E R M. II.
crosses.—Nay, it proposes to our imitation the Phil. ii. 4, &c.
 example of the supreme creator and father of man-
 kind, whose goodness is unlimited and universal; Luke vi. 36.
 especially in giving his son to die for us, even 1 John iv. 10, 11.
whilst we were enemies; for if God so loved us, we
ought also to love one another.

From this short view of the christian doctrine 'tis plain, that it lays down the most exalted scheme of benevolence, supported and enforced by the strongest motives. And, indeed, it has ever been reckoned one of the chief intrinsic excellencies of Christianity, that the goodness it recommends is so *pure* and *disinterested*, and aims, as much as possible, at promoting the *general happiness*. But yet, upon this very account, has it been reflected on, as if it had pass'd by, or lost in a *general, loose* and *undetermined* charity, two of the most sublime and noble instances of benevolence, *private friendship*, and *the love of our country*. I intend, therefore, to take this for the subject of my next discourse, wherein I shall endeavour to shew (besides the unanswerable reasons that there were, from the circumstances of the world at that time, why these things should not be particularly inculcated) that both private friendship, and the love of our country, so far as they have any thing truly rational and excellent in them, are included in, and must be entirely subservient to, the great law of *universal benevolence*, which is an infinitely more important and generous principle; that particular friendships may be extremely *base* and *mischievous*, and the love of our country supporting a faction against *the com-*

S E R M. *mon rights* of mankind ; but that, on the contrary, to be steady and inflexible in our endeavours to promote the *universal good*, tho' we are obliged, in order to it, to sacrifice private friends, nay the interests of any single society, how great and flourishing soever, is *manly, noble, godlike*.



S E R M O N III.

The perfection of the Christian scheme of benevolence; in answer to the objection from its not having particularly recommended private friendship, and the love of our country.

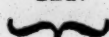
R O M. v. 7.

For scarcely for a righteous man will one die, yet, peradventure, for a good man some would even dare to die.

HA V I N G, in my last discourse, S E R M. III.
 shewn the excellency of benevolence, that 'tis vastly superior to justice, and the noblest virtue in social life; and having proved the peculiar excellency of the *Christian scheme* of benevolence, not only as 'tis most disinterested and generous, but of universal extent and influence; not to be confin'd by any difference of nation, religion, interest, nor suppress'd and extinguish'd by personal injuries: I proceed now to answer an objection that has been rais'd against it, by a late *noble*, and justly *celebrated*, writer, from its not particularly inculcating *private friendship*,
C 2
and

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and the *love of our country*. 'Tis thought very strange, that these, which are rank'd among the most *heroic* virtues, should be *purely voluntary in a Christian*, and no *essential parts of his charity*. * In order, therefore, to set this matter in a just light, I shall

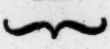
- I. Settle the notion of private friendship, and the love of our country, and shew how far they are truly virtuous and honourable. And then,
- II. Offer a few things, more directly, to vindicate the Christian benevolence against the force of this objection.

I. I am to settle the true notion of private friendship, and the love of our country, and shew how far they are truly virtuous and honourable. 'Tis undeniable, that both these principles have been grossly abus'd. Private friendships have been only little parties in vice and mischief, and public disorder; and an attachment to the interest of particular societies has been a vile conspiracy against justice, honour, liberty, and the peace and happiness of the world. 'Tis necessary therefore that we settle their proper bounds, that none may be led away, by the mere force of agreeable and bewitching sound, so as to pervert what, if rightly understood, are really *amiable and useful*, into *monstrous, unnatural, and hurtful* qualities.

Universal benevolence, then, is the *supreme law* to all rational beings, a law of eternal and

* CHARACTERISTICKS, Vol. I. p. 99.

immutable

immutable obligation, the authority of which S E R M.
ought not to be superseded, limited, or, in the III.
least, weakened by any selfish or partial affections. 
For if there be any beauty and amiableness, at
all, in doing good, the more extended our views
are, it must be so much the more meritorious and
honourable; and, consequently, to aim at the
universal good must be the highest degree of vir-
tue. ——— Nothing forms so great and wor-
thy a character ——— 'Tis indeed the chief part
even of God's moral rectitude; ——— and must,
therefore, be the supreme dignity and perfection
of human nature. Again, the happiness of the
whole species can't be *too intensely* pursued; where-
as all other affections are no longer *innocent*, than
while they are, at least, consistent with this; are
only *virtuous*, so far as they directly promote it;
but are *base* and *detestable*, when they interfere
with it.

To apply this to the case of *private friendship*.
When my love of a friend is inconsistent with
the regards I owe my country; and especially
when it opposes the general good of mankind,
to whom all my services are more immediately
and strictly due; 'tis an *unnatural* affection, and
ought to be rooted out of the mind; because
were it universally indulg'd, it would introduce
the utmost confusion, and an entire subversion of
all order and government. No man can support
his friend by interrupting the course of *justice*,
or violating the rules of *honour*, who is not an
utter stranger to virtue; but on the contrary, must
it be a *noble* action, agreeable to *reason*, *humanity*,
and every *benevolent* and *social* principle, to desert
him for the publick good. And this being the

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great rule, by which we are to determine, in all cases, concerning the expediency and fitness of private friendships; it follows farther, that they have nothing truly generous in them, but as they tend to cultivate and improve *universal benevolence*; and are a natural means to make the *whole species* happy.

For if they are not chosen for this reason because they are best upon the whole, if they are only not contrary to the public happiness, but have no direct influence to promote it, our views must be mean and selfish; and friendship will become a mere matter of *private convenience*, or else of *humour* and *fancy*, in either of which cases it must be uncertain and variable, as circumstances, opinions, and interests alter; or finally, it will be only *the love of ourselves*, i. e. of the resemblance of our own way of thinking, dispositions, and manners, in others; and, consequently, nothing like that sublime and heroic virtue for which it has been recommended, and which, indeed, it is in itself, so long as 'tis *the medium of universal benevolence*.

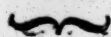
Again, all friendship, in order to its being truly rational and praise-worthy, must be founded in *virtue*. For this is the only ground of that esteem and steady confidence, which are inseparable from a worthy and generous friendship. 'Tis in this way alone that it can be at all useful, or, in any measure, promote the end of every lesser alliance, *viz.* the welfare of the great community of mankind. 'Tis this that distinguishes true friendship from the vile cabals of robbers and traitors, men of dark and mischievous designs, who may have all the other characters of it, such
as

as a similitude of “ tempers, passions, interests, S E R M.
“ secrecy, confidence, constancy, nay, a reci- III.
“ procal tenderness and affection for each other.”

And from hence it follows, that the love of a friend must be proportioned to his real merit, otherwise 'tis foolish and unreasonable *partiality*; and that we ought to prefer every man before him, that has, really, a more excellent and useful character. In our *esteem* we must necessarily do it, unless our private affection has blinded and perverted our judgments; and there are some cases supposable, in which, if we would not forfeit the glorious title of being the *friends of mankind* for a little fantastic name of friendship, we must do it in our *services* too. Suffer me to give an instance, in which this is indisputable. Suppose there is an office in the state to be dispos'd of, of vast consequence to the common welfare, that requires, to the right discharge of it, very great and distinguish'd abilities, and that the competition for it lies, entirely, between my most intimate friend, and another with whom I never cultivated any familiar acquaintance, but have only a general knowledge of; if my friend be unskilful and indolent, and I have reason to believe, from a thorough experience of his temper, that he will behave ill in it, to the detriment of the public; and the other has a much better judgment, more generosity, steadiness, command of his passions, and is qualified, upon all accounts, for greater usefulness; — Can I be long in suspense which to determine for? — Shall I compliment my *friend* at the expence of my *country*? Such friendships as these are so far from being instances of virtue, that they would be justly brand-

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ed with infamy: and whoever acted thus could have no real benevolence in him, which can never prefer a less good to a greater; nor consequently, the advantage and pleasure of *an individual*, or the gratifying his selfishness and vanity, to the *general* happiness.

I may add, that there is something, in almost all accounts of private friendship, that is in a great measure *mechanical*. A high esteem of a wise, virtuous, and useful character, an ardent zeal to serve our friends, and faithfulness to their interests, is what all may attain to; but the fervour and strength of passion that sometimes mixes with it, what we may call the *enthusiasm* of friendship, depends very much upon a particular constitution. — 'Tis the more gross part. — And tho' it be highly extolled, and is apt to strike in the relation, and beget the strongest prejudices in favour of friendship, 'tis rather by engaging our *affections*, than convincing our *judgment*. — What is most valuable in it is the deliberate and rational part, which is founded on principles of generous and universal benevolence.

And as there is a great deal *mechanical*; there are other things very highly celebrated, which, if they are prescrib'd as general rules and laws of friendship, are *wild* and *romantic*. For instance, 'tis magnified as a most noble and heroic action for a man to sacrifice all private interest, and even life itself, for his friend. I shall not dispute the disinterestedness and generosity of it, nor that it may, in some cases, be, upon the whole, very commendable; but there are others, in which, it will be easy to shew, that it may not only be *rash* and *imprudent* in him, but inconsistent with

prior

prior and more important obligations. — The circumstances of his *family*, and others whose happiness nearly depend upon him, — his importance to the *society of which he is a member*, — and usefulness to *the world in general*, — ought all to be consider'd; and may be very strong arguments to prevail with him to preserve himself. And if for the sake of a friend, who, tho' possess'd of several amiable qualities, may be of little consequence in active and social life, he deprives his children of a kind protector and guide, and the state of a wise experienc'd counsellor, the chief asserter and guardian of its liberties; and consequently over-rules the strongest impulses of *natural affection*, and the regard he owes his *country*, and *mankind*; his friendship is evidently founded on the ruins of *reason* and *humanity*. Let us therefore separate the *mechanical* part, and all *extravagant transports*, from private friendship, and consider it as a thing that reason may approve and justify; and we shall find, that 'tis nothing more than the *reciprocal esteem* and *affections* of *virtuous* minds, *united* by a harmony of inclinations, views, and interest, all *upright* and *generous*; — That it never exceeds, in any instance, the rules of *justice*, *truth*, and *honour*; — is always subservient to the great law of *universal benevolence*; — and valuable, not as 'tis an attachment to private persons, but as a means of promoting the cause of virtue, and the happiness of the world.

The same may be said of *the love of our country*, viz. that 'tis a rational and virtuous disposition, not merely, as 'tis a regard for a *particular part* of the species, but as it has a tendency to
advance

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advance the *universal good*. To love our country only because we *were born in it*, without carrying our views to any thing farther, is weak and childish; the prejudice of *education* and *custom*: This is making *mere chance* the ground and rule of our affection, and not the dictates of reason and virtue: Or are we strongly attach'd to the inhabitants of a particular spot only upon this account, our being engag'd to defend and support each other? — This is debasing a very noble principle, and making it *mean* and *selfish*. In order, therefore, to raise it to so great and heroic a virtue as it has been represented, we must seek out some other foundation for it. Now the true state of the matter I take to be this.

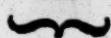
For their security against injury and violence, and to answer, in the most effectual manner, the great end of their benevolent and generous affections, mankind found it necessary to form *particular societies*: The reason of supporting these voluntary combinations is not only *self-defence*, but because such a method is for the *general good*: These two ideas ought never to be separated, because things can't continue in a regular and natural state, but while the good of every part is consider'd as subordinate to the good of the whole: Now the good of the whole is unquestionably best promoted, by every person's having a hearty affection for the society to which he belongs, and a strong zeal for its welfare: This is his immediate concern; — the station and sphere of usefulness that providence has assign'd him — And to be indifferent about his *country*, nay, indeed, not to cultivate an ardent love of it; but instead of
this,

this, to amuse himself with forming idle schemes for the benefit of *foreign* nations, to whom he is no way related, nor, perhaps, likely to be known, nor, consequently, to have so much influence among them, as to be able to reduce his schemes, were they ever so beneficial, to practice; is very preposterous and extravagant: 'Tis, in effect, resolving to be useless, and neglect the good of mankind altogether.

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Since, therefore, a love of the *public*, i. e. of the particular civil community of which we are members, and a generous defence of its laws and liberties, is the only way, that men, in general, have, to contribute their share to the happiness of the species, and, if universally cultivated, a natural means of effecting this noble and most desirable end; we must resolve the merit of it chiefly into this, and enlarge it beyond *narrow, contracted* views, if we would make it a sublime and heroic virtue: The undeniable consequence of which is, that 'tis only a rational principle, when 'tis entirely consistent with, and subservient to the supreme law of universal benevolence.—It ought never to propose a *distinct interest* from that of the whole; for then it immediately ceases to be an amiable and useful quality, and becomes one of the most vile and mischievous: For instance, when it prompts any to extend their territories by unjust conquests, to oppress and plunder weaker states, and spread slavery and destruction thro' the world; in all such cases, when a particular country is a *wicked faction* against the rights of all mankind, which, it would be for the general good, to have suppress'd and extirpated, no one who has any sense of generosity can rejoice in its success:

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success: Love of our country is then a *private* affection, and must give way to the *public* one: And tho' we may be so far concern'd for its prosperity, as to lament the degeneracy and violence that prevails in it, and even to hazard our lives to remedy its disorders; we can't surely wish well to it any other way, while 'tis carrying on such mischievous schemes; we can't rejoice in its victories, without declaring ourselves enemies to justice, liberty, and the universal happiness, and, consequently, being monsters of iniquity and cruelty.

It appears upon the whole, that both private friendship, and the love of our country are only so far amiable and generous, as they are branches of universal benevolence. Nothing can be a virtuous, a great or noble, but what is also a *useful* quality; and 'tis an infallibly right rule of judging in all cases of benevolence, which may seem to clash and interfere with each other, to aim at the *greatest* and *most extensive* good: So that, if there be a real necessity, I am to sacrifice my friend for the sake of my country, and my country for the general happiness of mankind. Universal benevolence, therefore, is infinitely the most exalted and heroic spring of action, because the universal good can't be pursued to *an excess*; but private friendship and the love of our country may be so perverted, as to become mischievous and destructive principles: The former is intirely *dis-interested*, and can proceed only from the love of goodness, and, consequently, is a most *godlike* disposition; the latter may both spring from *little, selfish* motives, and terminate in a *narrow private* interest: The former contains every instance of restrain'd and
partial

partial affection, that has any thing great and lovely in it, and is therefore the *whole sum* of social virtue; whereas the latter, without more inlarg'd views than the mere pleasure of a friend, or the welfare of our country, forms a character so far from being eminently good, that it wants *the very essentials* of true goodness. And this, alone, is sufficient to vindicate our Saviour's scheme of benevolence, and give us a high idea of its *excellency* and *perfection*, I proceed, however, in the

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SECOND place, to offer a few things, more directly, in answer to the objection that has been made against it, from its not recommending, particularly, private friendship, and the love of our country. And,

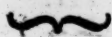
1st. There is one circumstance, which has been already hinted, that will go a great way, of itself, to remove this seeming difficulty, *viz.* that the Christian principle of universal benevolence includes both these, so far as they are founded in *reason*, and have any thing *virtuous* and *praiseworthy* in them: *Universal* benevolence must, in the very nature of the thing, comprehend every species of *real* benevolence; and a command to promote the general good, necessarily implies all the proper means of doing it; and, consequently, every instance of private friendship, and zeal for the interests of particular communities, that appears to have this natural tendency.

'Tis no just objection against moral discourses, that they lay down, chiefly, general rules for the right conduct of life; for these alone are *eternal* and *unchangeable* morality: and the true application of them to particular cases must be left

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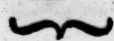
to every man's own reason, because it depends on a variety of circumstances, that alter the expediency of things. To apply this to the point before us; The great law of benevolence is to aim at the happiness of the whole species: This is a proper rule for all mankind, and obliges persons of every complexion and character; but the manner in which it may be done is, to different men, very different, and, consequently, must be referr'd, in a great measure, to their own judgment and discretion: Nor is this likely to create any confusion, because general principles are easily accommodated to particular circumstances, where there is an honest mind, and the least degree of reflection: For every one that thinks must immediately see, that nothing can be an act of real benevolence which opposes the universal good; and will soon discern in what cases, private friendship and the love of our country are a fit means to advance it.

Let me observe farther, tho' the *noble* author, whom we are considering, seems to think it a *strange* supposition, that private friendship is not a matter of *strict* and *indispensable* duty upon all, but, for the most part, a *purely voluntary* engagement. General benevolence is a fix'd, immutable, and universal duty. An esteem of good and virtuous characters is always rational, because 'tis necessarily connected with the love of virtue itself: But this is not the notion of friendship; which is a "*peculiar relation,*" form'd by a consent and harmony of minds *.

* *Charactericks, Vol. i. p. 98. in the marginal note.*

as well as founded in virtue; from whence 'tis S E R M. III. an undeniable consequence, that it can't be every man's duty, since it evidently depends on circumstances that are quite out of our power. There are innumerable instances, in which persons may find several among their acquaintance, and in the same sphere of life, whom they highly esteem, but not one proper to be chosen for a *close* and *intimate* friend; so that the recommending private friendship, *in the general*, must have been very absurd, since 'tis only a *rare* and *accidental* obligation, and never falls in the way of a great part of mankind. And, besides, it might have been attended with mischievous effects; for the bulk of the world, thinking it a duty of religion, and a necessary branch of sublime and heroic virtue, would enter into *rash*, *unconcerted*, and *disagreeable* alliances, which must, naturally, produce a great deal of disorder, and disturb the peace of societies: Whereas while they act upon the principle of universal benevolence, no ill consequences can ensue; and, therefore, the inculcating this principle only, as an essential part of morality, and leaving private friendship to fall in as a branch of it, just as prudence, on a view of all circumstances, directs, is the *wisest* and *best* way of instructing mankind. We may add farther,

2dly. To vindicate our Saviour's conduct on this occasion, that there has been very little need, in any age, to put men upon cultivating particular friendships, and the love of their country; but rather to give a check to those narrow limited affections, and correct the exorbitancies of them. Mankind have a *natural* inclination
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to both, and there is no fear of their neglecting either, so far as 'tis truly generous and useful; on the contrary, the only danger is, that they will be carried to so great a height, as to be prejudicial to the general good. The experience of our own times, and the history of all ages, is an ample justification of the truth of this remark.

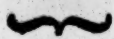
Friendships have always been frequent enough — But of what kind are they?—do they not spring from *humour* and *caprice*, from a harmony of *odd*, *whimsical*, and *unaccountable* tempers, from *singularity* and *selfishness*?—or are they built upon the solid foundations of *honour* and *virtue*? In like manner, zeal for the interest of a particular country is it not *universal*?—But then is it truly *benevolent* and *publick spirited*? Far from it: 'Tis more commonly an absurd and childish prejudice, that makes men so extravagantly fond of themselves, as to treat all other nations with insolence and contempt: 'Tis a zeal that makes an *idol* of our country, and is ready to sacrifice even the good of the whole species to it: There was no reason, then, that our Saviour should particularly inculcate these things, to which mankind have so *natural* a turn, and are so apt to indulge to *excess*: His great work was to rectify all disorders, and, in an especial manner, *the abuse of good principles*, and the extravagancies that arise from it; and this he has effectually done, in the case before us, by enforcing the obligations of universal goodness, which will *regulate* all inferior affections without *destroying* them: For the observing this rule will lead to every instance both of
friendship,

friendship, and love of our country, that is S E R M.
really *amiable* and *beneficial*, and discourage such III.
only of either kind as are *unmanly*, and *mis-*
chievous. Let me observe,

3dly. That there was a *particular reason*, from the circumstances of the world at that time, why the Christian religion should not directly and strongly recommend the love of our country: In general, 'tis not a thing necessary to be insisted on, because 'tis included in the love of mankind, and what all are powerfully inclin'd to by education, custom, their own particular interest, and the like; but rather expedient that such narrow prejudices should be remov'd, by inculcating more generous and extensive views: And 'twas much less to be expected at a juncture, when an affection for particular countries was a *general nuisance*, and triumph'd over justice and humanity: For 'tis well known, that the *Jews* were so partially fond of their own nation, that they look'd upon themselves as the only favourites of heaven; which made them severe and rigid in their censures, and morose and unsociable to all who were not of their religion: And, undoubtedly, the notion that seems, generally, to have prevail'd among them, that the *Messiah* was to be their temporal prince, and extend his dominion over all the earth, would have put them on subduing and oppressing other countries, as soon as they imagin'd they had a favourable opportunity for it: They wanted nothing but the power to effect this vile and barbarous design, which their *selfishness* and *pride* suggested.—And as for the *Romans*, whose noble lectures of be-

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nevolence and generosity are so much boasted of, and their love of their country represented as the very perfection of heroic virtue; the *Romans*, I say, were the *plagues* and *scourges* of mankind, and had actually carried their arms and conquests, and, together with them, terror, slavery, and ruin, thro' the greatest part of the then known world.

— Was this now a time to recommend narrow views, and an attachment to particular societies, when the *general interest* had suffered so much by it? — It was rather the way to have destroy'd *publick benevolence* altogether: The proper lesson to be inculcated, in such a confus'd and degenerate state of things, was certainly *universal goodness*, in order to put a stop to the progress of ambition, avarice and luxury, which had introduc'd such dreadful desolation, and subverted liberty, justice, and all social virtues: This was the only remedy that could be applied to the prevailing disorder: So that our Saviour's scheme of benevolence is not only, in itself, the *noblest* and most *godlike* that we can conceive of; but in keeping to fundamental and general principles, and not descending to lesser considerations, he acted the part of a *wise reformer*; — a friend to the *universal happiness*; — and an enemy to *oppression* and *tyranny*. Suffer me to add.

In the last place, that tho' the Christian religion has not particularly enjoin'd private friendship, and the love of our country, because, so far as they have any thing virtuous and commendable in them, they fall in necessarily with the regular pursuit of the general good; and
because

Christian scheme of benevolence.

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because 'twas needless in itself, this being the constant bent of human nature; and finally, because 'tis always more proper to restrain the excesses of these principles, than to allow them scope and latitude, and was so *particularly* at the time of our Saviour's appearance; tho', I say, for these very sufficient and weighty reasons, they are not directly enjoin'd in the Christian religion, yet it is a *false insinuation*, that it has given no encouragement to them: For we have, in the character of Christ himself, an eminent example of each of these virtues, which is equally binding, as an express law, upon all who acknowledge his authority: He chose but twelve persons to be his immediate and constant followers, and one of them he made his *friend*: Accordingly we read, in the history of the New Testament, of *the disciple whom Jesus loved*; whom he always treated with confidence, and particular marks of tenderness and affection.—— Joh. xix.

Here was a friendship that sprang from *virtue*; ^{20.} from a consent and harmony of the most *benevolent, mild, and amiable* dispositions; it was intirely *rational, disinterested, generous and faithful*; subservient to the *universal good*, being founded in the love of goodness itself; and consequently a perfect pattern for our imitation.

And was not his weeping over *Jerusalem*, Luke xix from a sense of its impending ruin, a noble ^{41.} proof of his ardent concern for the *public welfare*? were not all his labours to make his people happy, by reforming their corruptions and vices? was it not for this that he suffered so many abuses?——nay, did he not *even die* for the good of his country? I may add to this the example

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Rom. ix.
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of *St. Paul*, who was so transported by his affection for his countrymen, as to wish that the greatest of evils might befall himself, even to be *accurs'd from Christ*, if, by that means, he might be the instrument of preserving and establishing their prosperity. These are instances, than which, if we take in all circumstances, none ever were, or can be, more great and heroical; and had they been found among the old *Greeks or Romans*, they would have been celebrated with the most labour'd and magnificent encomiums. But when men set themselves to magnify the powers of reason, and run down revelation, every thing, in the latter, has a *low* and *invidious* turn given to it; the most godlike virtues lose their lustre; and the most exalted scheme of morality is debas'd and vilified; as in the case we have been considering, Christianity is represented as being defective for what is its chief excellency, and renders it vastly preferable to any system of moral philosophy, or any institution of religion, that ever appeared in the world.

Let us then be persuaded to cultivate, to the utmost, disinterested and universal benevolence; for what is the perfection of our religion must also be the rectitude and honour of our nature,——Let our constant aim be the good of mankind. —— Let us enlarge our minds, daily, from little narrow prejudices, that all our private pleasures, our friendships, our regards to our country, may be regulated with a view to this as their ultimate end.——Nay, if it were possible, we should extend our thoughts beyond our
own

own species, and take in *the whole universe of rational beings*; for the more unbounded scope we give to our generous benevolence and compassion, the more truly noble it is; and the more nearly do we resemble the supreme fountain of goodness, whose *tender mercies are over all his works.*

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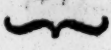
Of the image of God in man ; or
the excellency of human nature.

GEN. i. ver. 7. the former part.

*So God created man in his own Image, in
the Image of God created he him.*

S E R M.
IV.

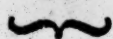
THERE is no part of knowlege more considerable than a right knowledge of human nature: It is of the utmost importance towards the regular conduct of life ; and all the errors of mankind in point of morality, *i. e.* the most fatal errors that reasonable creatures can be guilty of, are certainly owing to their not understanding, or not seriously considering, their own frame and constitution: And yet it may well be wonder'd at, that men should be such great strangers to the design of *their own* nature, and of all the objects of knowledge, know the least of *themselves* ; of *themselves*, I say, whom they are fond of even to excess, and whose welfare they necessarily desire, but while they continue in this state of ignorance cannot pursue : For unless we examine into our own
make,

make, and consider the powers and capacities S E R M.
wherewith we are indued, and the ends which IV.
the great Author of our being design'd us for, 
'tis impossible we should understand our *duty*, or
our *happiness*.

Indeed, human nature has been represented
in so *base*, *disagreeable*, and *monstrous* a form,
that the contemplation of it must needs be fright-
ful and shocking to a generous mind ; as having
lost its noble powers of reason and liberty, and
being the seat of nothing but irregular, impure,
and mischievous passions ; as incapable of any
thing that is good and virtuous, and prone to
all manner of vice and wickedness.—And if
this were true, who could take any satisfaction
in looking into himself, when he must behold
such a *hideous picture of deformity* ? — But,
thanks be to God, the honour of our nature
may be easily vindicated from such unjust re-
proaches, as will, I hope, evidently appear from
the ensuing discourse ; and, besides, such an
account of it is, in its direct consequences, of
the utmost prejudice to the interests of religion
and morality : For as, on the one hand, a right
sense of the dignity of human nature inspires great
designs, leads to the most beneficent, generous,
and Godlike actions, and is a strong preservative
from every thing that is vile and dishonourable ;
so, on the other, when it is described as having
nothing excellent or amiable in it, and as a
complication of *mean-spiritedness*, *ill-nature*, *ig-
norance* and *vice* ; and when, upon this founda-
tion, injustice, cruelty, ingratitude, pride, re-
venge, and the worst of villanies are represented
as *natural* to mankind ; this has a manifest tend-

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ency to encourage their degenerate and licentious practices, and furnishes them with an excuse for their wickedness, *viz.* the *necessary* corruption and depravity of their nature. And finally, if this be a true *picture* of human nature, what must we think of the *great original* from which it was copied? must not the giving such a character of it be highly dishonourable to the supreme, and immutable perfection of its glorious author? The consequence is plain and undeniable: For God *created man in his own image, in the image of God created he him.* In discoursing farther on these words, I shall

I. Show, wherein the image of the Deity, in man, consists; and that not only the *first parents* of the human race, but *all mankind since*, notwithstanding the corrupt and degenerate state of the world, were originally formed after the image of God. And,

II. Conclude with some proper and useful inferences,

I. I am to show wherein the image of the Deity, in man, consists; and that not only the *first parents* of the human race, but *all mankind since*, notwithstanding the corrupt and degenerate state of the world, were originally formed after the image of God. Some commentators have imagined, that by the image of God, in which he created our first parents, is meant a *visible splendor*, a *glory* that constantly attended them, and resembled, in some degree, the *Shechinah*, which was the glorious Symbol of the divine

divine presence: But this is matter of mere conjecture, and of very little consequence in itself. I shall therefore insist no longer upon it, but proceed to mention some things that are more plain and certain, and of general and evident importance.

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Man is a being partly *sensitive*, and partly *rational*. There can be no resemblance of his great Creator in the sensitive part of his frame, because HE is a pure and infinite spirit: And therefore when bodily parts, and such passions as frail men experience, are attributed to the great God in Scripture, we must understand such descriptions, as used in condescension to our weakness, and narrow imperfect conceptions of things; and interpret them in such a manner, as will make them consistent with plain passages that assert the *spirituality* of the divine nature, and with the reason and nature of things. It remains then, that man can bear the image of the Deity only in his intelligent nature. And, Gen. i. 26.

1st. He resembles his Creator in his *reason*, and *understanding*; whereby he is capable of making very considerable improvements in knowledge, and of discovering all those truths which are necessary to the right management of his conduct, and to secure his perfection and happiness: in that he is not impelled and determined by mere instinct, but is capable of considering and examining the nature and consequences of things, and of making a deliberate and wise choice: And this, very probably, is one of the principal things intended in the text. For God, having finished the inanimate and animal creation, is describ'd, as proceeding to the making a being in his own
image,

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image, after his likeness, i. e. a reasonable creature, who must, consequently, resemble him the supreme and most perfect reason; and the great privilege designed to be conferred upon this being was a dominion over the inferior creatures, in order to which reason was absolutely necessary. And because reason is the most eminent distinction and glory of the human nature, by which man, as Lord of the lower world, is highly advanced above the other beings that inhabit it, 'tis not unlikely, that the historian represents the Deity as proceeding to this part of his creation with peculiar ceremony, to do honour thereby to this excellent nature, and give us a becoming sense of its importance and dignity. But,

2dly. The image of God, in man, has a respect, farther, to the moral rectitude in which he was created. The rational principle within him strongly directed to all the duties of piety; to the practice of justice; and the exercise of benevolence, one of the brightest characters of the Deity, in all its branches; to which last virtue he was also excited by peculiar instincts, that it was impossible for him entirely to suppress without losing humanity itself. And as to his passions, they were all in a regular state, and subject to the government of reason; which was capable of keeping them within their proper bounds, that they might not, at any time, be extravagant and disorderly. This was the first happy state of man. And in consequence of his understanding, the great compass of his rational powers, his moral rectitude, and particularly, the kind and benevolent affections of his nature, (in which consisted his more immediate resemblance of his maker)

he

he was appointed to exercise dominion over the inferior creatures; and so to be the *representative* of the great author and governor of nature in this lower world, and dispense his authority. I have given this short and general account of the image of God in man, that I might have time to demonstrate, what is of the greatest importance, and the only thing that can make a discourse on this subject useful to us, *viz.* That, in all these respects, not only the *first parents* of mankind, but their *descendants*, were originally formed after the divine image. And,

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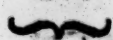
1<sup>st</sup>. None will deny that mankind are *reasonable* creatures, how much soever they may be inclined to diminish the *excellency*, and weaken the *force* of human reason: And, I think, it can, with as little justice, be denied, that the reason of mankind is able, in all important instances, to distinguish between right and wrong, good and evil; and that their intellectual faculties are of very *large extent*, formed for making great and wonderful discoveries, and capable of being, for ever, enlarged and improved; so that, as reasonable creatures, they still evidently retain the image of God. And this, I believe, will be easily allowed, and the only question will be, whether mankind, in their *original formation*, before they are perverted and corrupted by prejudices of education and custom, the influence of evil examples, and vicious habits wilfully contracted, still retain the image of God, with respect to *moral rectitude*.

Now that this is really the case appears from hence, that they have understanding to direct the impulses and affections of the animal nature, to consider



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consider when they are to be indulged, and when restrained, to form just notions of happiness, and regulate the desire of present sensitive pleasure, that it may not interfere with the rectitude of their higher powers, and the exercise of benevolence towards their fellow-creatures; that having a principle of reason and liberty, they must be capable of knowing, loving, and serving God their Creator, and supreme governor, and of the pleasures of mutual benevolence and friendship, as well as of governing their animal passions, by keeping them within due bounds, and controuling them when they grow licentious and extravagant; and that this is the *direct tendency* of human nature, even in its present state. For human nature, even in its present constitution, is a reasonable nature, and the reasonable nature of man has no *evil* tendency, but directs to the pursuit of wisdom and virtue, and to suppress all corrupt desires.

For instance, is it not *agreeable to human nature* to reverence the great author and governor of the world, and secure his protection and favour, on whom we absolutely depend, by an imitation of his perfections, and obedience to his commands? Does not *nature* teach us to be just and charitable, to compassionate the miserable, and relieve the distressed? are not these virtues suitable to our *strongest affections* and *instincts*? and the contrary vices, by the universal consent of mankind, branded as *inhuman* and *monstrous*? Again, is it not *natural* to us to seek and endeavour to promote our own happiness, and, consequently, to mortify all those evil appetites, which are the sources of corruption and misery? Or does our *nature* direct us to rebel against the author of our being, to  
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prey upon our own kind, to delight in oppression and injustice, and in the misery of our fellow creatures, and to be agitated by wild and extravagant desires which sink us even below the condition of brutes? Mankind may, indeed, degenerate into this miserable state, but, still, all must allow that this is not *human nature*, but a most dreadful *depravation* of it; for our reasonable nature teaches us to abhor these things: So that, according to *Solomon's* observation, in all ages of the world, *God made man upright, but they have sought out many inventions.* For the *original integrity* of human nature does not consist in having no temptations to vice, but in being able to subdue and conquer such temptations: Which it must be capable of doing as it has reason to direct it to what is right and fit to be done, and a power of choosing freely, and consequently of acting according to its right judgment of things.

It must, after all, be confess'd, that there is a *sickness* and *disorder*, in our mortal frame, introduced by the fall, which, considering the closeness and intimacy of their union, may be supposed, in some measure, to affect the mind: It may be a clog upon our reasoning powers, and strengthen the animal passions: But this is entirely a *natural*, and not a *moral* defect; which can't arise, in any instance, from bodily constitution, but only from a perverseness and depravity of the will: And such natural disorders are only, like external objects and circumstances, *occasions* of, and *temptations* to vice, and consequently of no weight against any part of the preceding argument.

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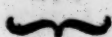
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The grand foundation of men's error, in judging of these things, has been this, either that they have taken their estimate of human nature from the *sensitive* and *brutal* part of it, and not from the *intelligent* and *moral*, and represented to their minds, as the *original* state of it, such evil dispositions and habits as are of their own creating; or else, that they have understood particular passages of scripture, which give the character of the most profligate and abandoned sinners, as describing the *natural* temper of all mankind; and strained strong *figurative* expressions, which are very frequent in the eastern languages, to their highest sense, contrary to the general design of the revelation, as well as the plain reason of things: And, indeed, if persons will proceed in such an *undistinguishing* way, 'tis no wonder they bring themselves to believe any thing, however absurd and in itself incredible. Let me only add, that as it is a plain and obvious truth, how much soever mens partial views of things, and misapprehension of some doubtful passages of scripture may confound and darken it; that human nature, even in its present state, is a reasonable nature, and that to such a nature as this vice and wickedness, of all kinds, is necessarily repugnant: besides, I say, that this is an obvious truth; such a sense of things, which is so much the honour of human nature, and of the great God, who formed it to resemble his own perfections, must yield abundant satisfaction to every pious and every generous mind.

I shall but just mention, that man continues still to bear the image of God, in respect of his dominion over the inferior creatures. The *inanimate*,

*mate, vegetable, and animal* world are useful to him various ways; some by their labour; others for food and clothing; and not only administer to his necessities, but contribute, jointly, to the convenience and ornament of life: And it may be questioned, whether it would be possible for him, in some instances, to exercise his dominion in the manner he now does, were it not for a kind of *instinct* planted in the nature of animals, to acknowledge him as their superior Lord. But I dismiss this head, and proceed

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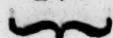
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II. To make some useful inferences from what has been said. And,

1<sup>st</sup>. Let us be thankful to God for having so distinguished and *honoured* our nature, as to form it after his own image. Our *rational* and *moral* powers, by which we resemble the Deity, are the chief excellency and advantage of our nature: By these we are eminently advanced above the brute creatures, rendered capable of the pleasures of society and friendship, and of improvements in knowledge and virtue: 'Tis by means of these powers, that we *alone*, of the whole visible world, are fitted to contemplate the great author of the universe, and celebrate the glory of his perfections. Are we not then under the strongest ties of gratitude, by our united praises, to excite, in one anothers minds, a warm and affectionate sense of his goodness, and a generous ambition of imitating his most excellent character? Shall we omit a duty, for which we are so *peculiarly* formed, and the obligation to which arises, immediately, from our very make and constitution? And as the noble



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noble faculties, with which he has adorned our minds, qualify us for paying him a *voluntary* homage and obedience, shall we not testify our sense of this high favour by the most entire and chearful resignation, and devotedness to his service?

All the laws, by which he governs us, are the result of most perfect wisdom and goodness, and calculated to promote our supreme perfection and felicity; and therefore piety, justice, charity and temperance, or the regulating our affections and desires, are essentially our duty by the very frame of our nature: And if we are wilfully deficient in any one branch of it; if we are thoughtless and inconsiderate, and negligent of our actions, we are unworthy the name of *reasonable* creatures, and highly affront the wise and bountiful author of our beings, who hath bestowed that excellent character upon us.

2dly. Let us maintain a just sense of the *worth* and *dignity* of our nature, as we have the *honour* to be formed after the image of God: I mean, that we should value it in such a degree, as is necessary to enable us to support our character, and inspire sentiments of generosity and virtue. 'Tis a *laudable* greatness of mind to preserve such an opinion of the excellency of our nature, as shall restrain from base and disgraceful actions: And no thought will more effectually answer this end, than that of our being made in the likeness of the greatest and best of beings: Shall such a one dishonour himself so far, as to relinquish the noble entertainments of the mind, which are peculiar to rational beings, for those gross and sensual gratifications, which he enjoys in common with inferiour and irrational creatures? and thereby from

from being exalted to a resemblance of the Deity, S E R M.  
sink into the condition of a *mere animal*? An in- IV.  
genuous spirit would reject all temptations of this  
kind with *scorn* and *indignation*.

Or shall I consent to become *viler* than a brute, by rooting out of my nature the principles of benevolence and compassion, which are the most lovely and adorable perfections of the supreme being, and making myself a *monster* of cruelty and revenge?

When reason, which, by the skilful hand that formed us, was placed in the seat of government, is subjected to blind and headstrong appetites, and we are the *slaves* and the *sport* of passion; when we are ashamed of a wise and regular conduct, and steady adherence to the rules of religion, or afraid of the consequences, and sacrifice our virtue to worldly honour and advantage; when our intelligent and active powers, which are fitted for such noble purposes, and high employments, are lost in *indolence* and *sloth*; when instead of being useful to others, and cultivating, in our minds, habits of justice, and universal charity, we practise oppression, fraud, and injury; alas! how woefully is that excellent nature *debased*, which was formed for such high advancement, and even for godlike perfection? Where is, then, the *amiable image* of the Deity, our chief ornament and glory! Nay, I may ask, where is *humanity* itself! For 'tis reason alone that makes men of us, and is the most distinguishing part we bear of the divine image; and therefore *as men*, and creatures resembling the great author of our beings, we ought to have a just and constant sense of the dignity of

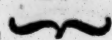
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S E R M. our reasonable nature, that we may never be tempted to do any thing unworthy of it.

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3dly. The notion, that man was made after the image of God, teaches us to love, respect, and honour our fellow creatures, as well as to set a just value on ourselves: For the affection and respect being due to *human nature*, or rather to the degrees of *reason* and *moral perfection*, its resemblance of the Deity, which appear in it, is equally due to it in my neighbour as in my own person; and can't be with-held without doing justice, and shewing contempt both to the *image*, and *original*. Cruelty, even to brute creatures, is a certain sign of a very base and degenerate mind; but it must be attended with peculiar aggravations, when 'tis exercised towards such as bear a resemblance of our maker: And therefore 'tis very remarkable, that when God appointed, by an express command, that murderers should be punished with death, this reason is assign'd for it,

Gen.ix.6. *for in the image of God made he man.*

Upon the same account every lower injury must be criminal in proportion; and the contrary duties of benevolence and mercy necessary and indispensable. And, doubtless, 'tis for this reason, among others, that the love of God and of our neighbour are represented, in scripture, as having an inseparable connection with each other; which, indeed, is very evident, even from the nature of the thing. And since ALL mankind are made after the likeness of God, our good will to them must be *universal*: For we act a very contradictory and inconsistent part, if we profess a reverence and esteem of the God of *human nature*, the father of *the spirits of all flesh*, and pretend to celebrate

celebrate the glory of his *universal* goodness; and, at the same time, confine our good offices to a particular *family, nation, or religious profession*; and are hard hearted to all the rest, who, equally, bear the impressi<sup>o</sup>n. of his excellent and divine image.

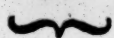
Again, as we believe that we were made in the image of God, and to act in imitation of his example, 'tis our duty to exercise our dominion over brute animals with *lenity, moderation, and mercy*: For by unnecessary severities and cruelties towards them, we manifest a barbarous and savage temper of mind, and consequently that we have lost those sentiments of goodness and pity, which are our most glorious resemblance of the great Creator; and act contrary to those excellent rules, which he himself adheres to in the government of the universe. And I can't help observing upon this occasion, that our treatment of brute creatures, who, in respect of their many services to mankind, as well as from the regard due to our *common Creator*, have a claim to much better usage from us, must be matter of great uneasiness to persons of a benevolent and generous disposition; not only upon the account of the misery which they endure; but because the barbarous instruments of their misery are so far from having that merciful temper, which the Christian religion recommends, that they seem, almost, to have forgot common humanity.

4thly. Since no part of the image of God appears in the constitution of our bodies, and the animal frame, but all in the intelligent nature; let us not value ourselves chiefly upon health, strength, beauty, or any other enjoyments that



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are external to the mind, but upon cultivating our rational powers, and our moral perfection; or, in the language of scripture, on our being *created, after the image of God, in righteousness and true holiness.*

Finally, we learn, from what has been said, to value the Christian religion, the chief view of which is to purify and exalt human reason, obscur'd and debas'd by superstition and vice, and restore the *original rectitude* of our nature: This great design it is very wisely adapted to promote. For the laws of this excellent revelation have a necessary tendency to the supreme perfection and happiness of reasonable beings; and it enforces the observation of them, in which consists our nearest and most honourable conformity to the nature of God, by the most important and encouraging motives.

Rom.i.18. By the gospel, *the wrath of God is reveal'd from heaven, against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who hold the truth in unrighteousness.*

2 Pet. i. 4. Therein, likewise, *are given unto us exceeding great and precious promises, that by these we might be partakers of a divine nature; particularly the promise of a glorious resurrection to eternal life, when the faculties of the mind will be enlarged, and its pleasures more pure and substantial; and when even this corruptible and animal frame will be raised a spiritual body, and put on incorruption and immortality; and, consequently, instead of being a clog upon the rational nature, be assisting to it in its most refined operations. Then it will be seen, in a much more glorious manner than it ever has been in this world, or than it could have been if mankind had retained their primitive innocency, that God made man in his own image:*

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Then the human nature will appear in its fullest S E R M.  
*lustre and dignity.* IV.

I can't conclude without observing, that even the *positive* institutions of Christianity are calculated to advance the same blessed design, namely, to restore and perfect the image of the Deity in us; as, by their tendency to establish and confirm good dispositions, they assist and promote the pursuit of *real* and *Godlike* virtue. Let us be persuaded therefore, in the use of those means which our holy religion prescribes, to get as great a resemblance of our maker, in his *moral* character, as is possible; that we may hereafter be admitted into the regions of light and immortality, where we shall be more compleatly *like him*, because we shall *see him as he is*, and improve in this likeness, and consequently, in honour and felicity for ever.





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## S E R M O N V.

G O D not an arbitrary being.

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R O M. ix. 20.

*Nay, but, O man, who art thou that repliest against God? —*

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**T**H O' religion be in itself most excellent, and founded on the highest reason, there is a great deal of skill and judgment required in order to a rational and successful defence of it. We ought not only to understand it thoroughly ourselves, before we attempt to recommend it to others, but should take care to support it by none but *solid* arguments, that will bear being examined, and stand the test of a strict and critical enquiry; and to give *proper* answers to the objections of its adversaries. For, by an ill management, we may injure and expose the best cause in the world; and when the opposers of religion find that our arguments for it are weak and trifling, they will easily be persuaded to triumph, as if they had gained a complete victory; and imagining, tho' without just ground, that this is all that can be said in vindication of it, their prejudices will be more strong and

and invincible: This is especially true with respect to our reasonings about the *providence* of God, upon which all religion depends. The same way of answering objections will not do in all cases; but, on the contrary, what may be very properly urged at one time, will, at another, leave the truth quite naked and defenseless; nay, in the opinion of the ignorant and prejudiced, strengthen the cause of *infidelity*.

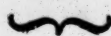
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Thus the words of the text were very *pertinently* applied by St. *Paul*, as I shall have occasion to shew in the following discourse; but have been used by others, who overlook the particular case of which the apostle was treating, in answer to objections to which they are by no means adapted; objections that are really *unanswerable*, being against supposed methods of conduct in the Deity, which are absolutely inconsistent with justice and goodness: And since, besides this, such principles have been inferred from them, as represent the supreme and most perfect being under the character of a mere *arbitrary* sovereign; and render it impossible for us to *judge of*, or *argue from* his moral perfections, which are the only foundation of amiable conceptions of him, and of the true peace and comfort of mens minds, as well as the surest rule we have to direct us in our religious enquiries; I think I cannot imploy your time more profitably, than in settling the true sense of this text, and guarding it against misconstructions: Especially if it be considered, that 'tis but too natural for unthinking people to make ill uses of it, injurious to the honour of God, and the cause of piety and virtue. I shall therefore,



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I. Point out two or three things that are not imply'd in it.

II. Propose a few cases, to which, if they could happen, and were urged as objections against the providence of God, it would not be a sufficient and rational reply. And then,

III. Shew to what cases these words may be properly applied.

I. I am to point out two or three things that are not implied in the text, but are false and groundless inferences from it. And,

1<sup>st</sup>. We ought not to infer from it, that God is a despotic *arbitrary* Sovereign, whose *will* is the only rule of his actions. The great God, tho' he be supreme and accountable to none, always governs himself by the eternal and unalterable rules of wisdom, equity, and goodness: His will is not, *itself*, the standard and measure of right; but there is an intrinsic necessary difference, in the *nature of things*, between just and unjust, beneficence and cruelty, that cannot be altered by the authority, will, or determination of any being whatsoever. Indeed, what God wills is always right and fit, always, upon the whole, fittest and best. But why? not merely because he *wills* it, but because he is necessarily wise, just and good. For can any man imagine, that if he should will to deceive, to vex and torment his innocent creatures, and employ his infinite power only to make them miserable (which is a very possible supposition, if his *will alone* be the rule of his proceedings) such a conduct would be

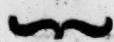
be *justifiable*; nay, for even this must be main-<sup>S E R M.</sup>  
tained as a necessary consequence from such prin-<sup>V.</sup>  
ciples, that it would be *better* and more *praise-*  
*worthy* than righteousness, truth and mercy?

There cannot be a more dishonourable reflection on the Deity, than to suppose he acts without a reason, merely from *humour*, and *arbitrary pleasure*: It represents him as a *tyrant*, not as a *wise* and *righteous* Governor: It renders him *frightful* to our contemplations, the object of *aversion* and *horror*, and destroys all rational esteem and love of him, and confidence in him: All expectations of favour from him must sink and vanish at once. For who knows how such a *capricious* being, who is not determined by reason and justice, but makes his will his only law, who can know, I say, in what manner he will act — What possible assurance can there be, that he will not resolve on the *misery*, and *ruin*, of his rational creatures? Nay, if he has promised the contrary, can we have any probability that the same *arbitrary will* that made, will not also break the promise? Mere will and humour are *fickle*, *uncertain*, *changeable* things, but truth and goodness are *steady* principles, and a solid foundation for our trust and hope. I shall only add, that the representing the Deity in this manner renders him infinitely more *formidable* than any *earthly tyrants* ever were, or can be, even those who have been the greatest scourges and plagues to mankind, because he is possessor of almighty and uncontrollable power; and the thought of almighty power, that is not directed by wisdom and goodness, must fill the mind with the utmost *astonishment* and *terror*. — Shall we then give such a *reproachful*,



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*ful*, such a *detestable* character of the most perfect, the most amiable of all beings? — shall we picture the very *best* of beings as the very *worst*? — And represent him, in whose unerring wisdom, strict impartial justice, and universal unchangeable goodness, the whole rational world have the highest reason to *rejoice*, as one that every wise man must wish *not to exist*.

*2dly*. It can't be inferr'd from the text, that men are not to enquire into the reasons of God's proceedings; or that they are, in no cases, able to judge of the justice of his methods of providence. For God himself, in the scriptures, frequently *appeals* to mankind concerning the equity of the general rules of his providential government: From whence 'tis plain, that even he, that most perfect being, who is directed by absolute and invariable reason, would not have us *believe implicitly* that any thing is just because he does it; but only requires of us to approve of it so far, as we can reconcile it to the general principles of justice and equity. In making this appeal God evidently supposes, that the *reason* of mankind is not only capable of judging in *matters of religion*, but of determining concerning *his actions*; at least concerning the fitness of the *general rules*, by which he governs the world: And therefore men are *over modest*, when they refuse to allow their reason that honour which the great Creator himself has done it; when they represent it as blind and erroneous; in cases of the highest importance; and as knowing no more, and having no more distinct and proper ideas of the moral perfections of the supreme

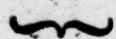
preme Governor, than the brutes that are void of S E R M. understanding. Little do they consider how much V. they dishonour and disparage the *infinite wisdom* of God, when they disgrace and vilify their own reason; how much, I say, they dishonour the infinite wisdom of God, who hath appealed to this *discarded, abandoned* reason to decide in points of the utmost consequence, and as the rule by which we must be *ultimately* conducted, in all our religious enquiries: For, indeed, whether God had appealed to it or no, men must, if they think, necessarily follow its directions; and no authority whatever, however it may *restrain* and *terrify*, can make them *believe* any principles, or approve of any actions as *just* and *right*, which are evidently repugnant to it.

And if we are capable of judging concerning the equity of those rules by which the divine government is exercised, the *general principles* of justice must be the same both with respect to God and man. If they are different with respect to our Maker, and are something *mysterious*, and *incomprehensible*, we know not what, 'tis impossible we should be able to determine, in any instance, whether the divine conduct be just, or unjust; for how can we judge *without ideas*? And thus an essential perfection of the Deity will be impossible to be demonstrated by us, which, notwithstanding, is a fundamental principle of all religion. Indeed there may be difficulties, to such imperfect and short-sighted creatures as we are, in judging of *particular actions* of providence, for want of understanding the *entire scheme* that the great governor of the world is pursuing; but if we



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we suppose that God himself can, for instance, punish his creatures for what they could not help, and yet be clear of the charge of *injustice*, we confound and destroy the necessary and immutable distinction between good and evil; and make it impossible for mankind to imitate his moral perfections, in which their highest honour and happiness consists. We could, then, have no probability what kind of behaviour was likely to be pleasing to him, nor what scheme of religion was most worthy of him: Nay we could not be sure that the *best* of men would not be the objects of his displeasure, and the *worst* his peculiar favourites; and, consequently, the practice of religion, and pursuit of virtue, would really be, as its enemies misrepresent it, no better than *enthusiasm*.

And from what has been said it necessarily follows, that the supreme being will never think we do him honour, if we give such an account of the conduct of his providence, as contradicts *our natural notions of justice and equity*: Nay, to say that he is *unjust* may be more honourable to him, than to give him the character of a *righteous* being. For upon the supposition that the general notion of justice is *quite distinct*, in God, from what it is in man; if we say the Deity is unjust, we say a thing of which we have no certain determinate idea; and, consequently, nothing that is directly injurious to his absolute perfection: The word injustice is a mere *empty sound*, without meaning. But if we affirm that he may deceive his creatures, or punish them beyond what their iniquities deserve, we represent him, *really*, as an evil, vitious being, one whom every wise and good

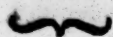
good man must abhor; and, consequently, fix a <sup>S E R M.</sup> reproach upon his character, that no *nominal compliments* can atone for. For even such imperfect creatures as we, if *just* and *good* were made to signify *tyranny* and *cruelty*, should be so far from being fond of accepting the title, that we should reject it, if it was offered us, with disdain and indignation.

There is a phrase commonly used, which perhaps, has led some persons into the mistakes I have been guarding against, *viz.* that the end which God designs, in all his actions, in the creation and providential government of the world, is *his own glory*. The expression itself is, undoubtedly, capable of a just and rational sense; but has been grossly misapplied, and made to signify, what it can never fairly signify, something *distinct* from, and even *inconsistent* with, the exercise of justice and goodness. And, indeed, 'tis natural for men to interpret it agreeably to the notions they entertain of God; and, consequently, with persons whose apprehensions are different, it will have a quite different meaning, and be either true, or false, as their apprehensions are rational or otherwise. Thus, if men conceive of God as a mere *absolute sovereign*, according to them, his glory must consist in the exercise of an *uncontroulable* and *unaccountable sovereignty*, and every thing will be right, merely because he wills it, and has resistless power to effect it. But this, I have shewn, is figuring the almighty being as a *tyrant*, who delights in nothing but lawless will, and arbitrary dominion; whereas the true glory of a sovereign is in the wisdom, justice, and clemency



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mency of this government. Again, if we imagine it to be the chief attribute of the Deity, that he is *strict* and *rigorous* in punishing; his glory will be most eminently displayed when he is most *stiff* and *inexorable*, when he has most of *stern*, *inflexible severity*, and least of *mercy*. But if we believe him to be necessarily *wise*, *righteous*, and *good*, it will then be his chief glory to exercise an *equal* and *impartial*, but, at the same time, a *gracious* providence over all his creatures; and invariably to pursue the fittest measures to promote the *general good*. And I may appeal to all mankind, if they will lay aside their prejudices, and consult only their reason, whether this does not give a vastly more honourable and amiable notion of him, than the describing him either as an *arbitrary sovereign*, or an *unrelenting judge*. The glory of God can't be a distinct consideration from the exercise of his moral perfections for the happiness of his creatures, because in this view he appears most excellent, and in the highest honour and dignity, as creator and governour of the universe, and the compassionate father of all intelligent beings: And a defect in *power*, *knowledge*, or *extent of dominion*, would not stain and obscure his glory, in any degree of comparison, like acts of *injustice*, and *cruelty*. I proceed now,

2dly. Having pointed out some general principles that are falsely inferred from the text, nay, but, O man, who art thou that repliest against God? to mention, briefly, a few cases, to which if they could happen, and were urged as objections against the providence of God, it would not be a *sufficient*, and *rational* reply.

And,

And, in general, such an answer must be very *weak* and *trifling* in all cases, that are evidently repugnant to justice and goodness. Thus, if we could suppose, that God had absolutely determined the final and eternal misery of great numbers of his rational creatures; or that he tempted and excited them to sin; that he enjoined impracticable duties, and punished any for not believing or not doing impossibilities; if these extravagant things, I say, could be supposed of the supreme and all-perfect being, who is *righteous in all his ways*, and whose *tender mercies are over all his works*; it would be the most *impertinent* thing in the world, to think to satisfy the reason of mankind by resolving all into his *sovereignty*, and saying *who art thou, that repliest against God?* The *sovereignty* of God, and his right to act as he pleases in cases where justice is not concerned, is not the thing disputed, but his *equity* and *goodness*; which can only be vindicated by shewing, either that the above-mentioned methods of acting are not instances of *arbitrariness* and *cruelty*, or that *arbitrariness* and *cruelty*, which are reckon'd monstrous crimes in all other beings, are no *blemishes* in God's government of the world.

Indeed, had I a notion of the supreme creator and father of mankind (I speak it with quite different sentiments, and with the highest esteem and reverence of his moral character) but had I really a notion of him as destitute of equity and benevolence, and acting only for the ostentation of his supreme power, and sovereign dominion, I might, perhaps think it *prudent* not to complain, that I might not expose myself to  
the



S E R M. the resentment of so terrible an enemy ; — but  
 V. would there be ever the less *reason* for complaint?

The *mouth* of the *objector* might be stopped by his fears ; — but would the *force* of the *objection* be at all abated? It could not be, as long as there remained any difference in actions, any distinction of just or unjust. For if *power alone* does not constitute right, (and if it does, the most powerful, in every degree, must be *universally*, and without *exception*, the most righteous) the *greatest* being, be his power ever so extensive, and his dominion ever so uncontrollable, can have no more authority to be unjust and cruel than the meanest ; but, on the contrary, will be, in proportion, a more *evil* and *mischievous* being, and more justly the object of universal abhorrence. It remains to be enquired,

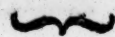
3dly. To what cases the words of the text may be *properly* applied. Now this will be best determined by considering the particular argument the Apostle was pursuing, and to which they immediately relate. In the 2d and 3d verses of this chapter, he laments, in a very *pathetic* manner, the dismal fate of his countrymen, who were cast off from being the people of God, and devoted to destruction, for their wilful opposition to the gospel, after they had been long distinguished by peculiar and extraordinary privileges. In the 6th verse he insinuates an objection, *viz.* that by rejecting the *Jews*, the word, or promise of *God*, which was made to the seed of *Abraham* would not have its *effect* ; and, in answer to it, observes these two things. 1st. That the descendants of *Jacob*,  
 or

or *Israel*, did not make up the whole of *Israel*, or the people of God comprehended in the promise; but as he argues more distinctly in the 4th chapter of this Epistle, *ver. 11, &c.* all those *Gentiles* were included, who trod in the steps of *Abraham's* faith; and, consequently, the calling them to the advantages of the *Messiah's* kingdom was not *frustrating*, but *fulfilling* the promise. And, 2dly. That the promise was never made to all the *natural* race of *Abraham*. This he proves, *ver. 9.* from the words of the promise it self, *at this time will I come; and Sarah shall have a Son.* Nor was this the only limitation of the seed of *Abraham*; for, as he adds, *when Rebecca also had conceived by one, even by our Father Isaac, (the children being not yet born, neither having done any good or evil, that the purpose of God, according to election, might stand, not of works, but of him that calleth) it was said unto her, the elder shall serve the younger.* The sense of which words is plainly this, that “ God, while the children  
“ were yet in their mothers womb, and, con-  
“ sequently, before they could, by their acti-  
“ ons, either recommend themselves to his fa-  
“ vour, or merit his displeasure, determined  
“ that the posterity of *Esau* should serve those  
“ of *Jacob*; in order to shew, that his mak-  
“ ing any family, or race of men, his pecu-  
“ liar people, or, in other words, his taking  
“ them under his special protection, and con-  
“ ferring extraordinary advantages upon them,  
“ depended on his own wise purpose, as hav-  
“ ing a right to bestow his favours on whom  
“ he pleased, and not on any works and de-  
serts



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does not at all relate to *Jacob* and *Esau* considered *personally* is evident from hence, that it is not true *personally*, but only in a *national* sense, that *the elder* did *serve the younger*. Again, the text in *Genesis*, to which here is a reference, proves unquestionably, that this was the only thing intended in the promise: *Two NATIONS are in thy womb, and the one PEOPLE shall be stronger than the other PEOPLE, and the elder shall serve the younger*. And finally, that Gen. xxv. noted passage, *Jacob have I loved, but Esau .23 have I hated*, speaks only of the distinction which God, in his providence, made between the race of *Jacob* and *Esau*, with respect to *temporal* and *outward* advantages. For the words, of which *St. Paul* quotes only the general substance, stand thus in the prophet *Malachi*; *I have loved you, saith the Lord, yet ye say, where-in hast thou loved us? Was not Esau Jacob's brother? yet I loved Jacob, and I hated Esau; — but how! — and laid his mountains and his heritage waste.* Mal. i. 2. 3.

Having sufficiently answered the first objection, the apostle comes to another, verse the 14th. *What shall we say then? is there unrighteousness with God? God forbid. "Is it any " injustice in God to choose one people before " another, to confer upon them extraordinary favours? By no means."* This he argues, with the *Jews*, from several passages in their own Scriptures: And in the text, and some following verses, (upon which I shall give you the excellent paraphrase of the great *Mr. Locke*) he argues the same point from the reason of the thing.

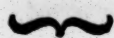
thing. Nay, but, O man, who art thou that repliest against God? Shall the thing formed say to him that formed it, " Shall the nations that are  
" made great, or little, shall kingdoms that  
" are raised, or depress'd, say to him in whose  
" hands they are to dispose of them as he  
" pleases," *Why hast thou made me thus? Hath not the potter power over the clay, of the same lump to make one vessel to honour, and another to dishonour? What if God willing to shew his wrath, and to make his power known, endured, with much long suffering, the vessels of wrath fitted to destruction? And that he might make known the riches of his glory on the vessels of mercy which he had afore prepared unto glory? " What if  
" God willing to punish the sinful people of  
" the Jews, and to do it so as to have his  
" power known, and taken notice of in the  
" doing it, bore with them a long time, even  
" after they had deserved his wrath, as he  
" did with Pharaoh, that his hand might be  
" the more eminently visible in their destruc-  
" tion? And that also at the same time he  
" might, with the more glory, make known  
" his goodness and mercy to the Gentiles,  
" whom, according to his purpose, he was  
" in a readiness to receive into the glorious  
" state of being his people under the gos-  
" pel?"*

I hope it appears, from what has been said, that this whole chapter, which has been so confounded and darkened, relates only to God's dealings with *nations* and *collective bodies* of men; and not to his favour or displeasure towards *particular persons*, and determining absolutely, with-



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out any regard to their actions, their *eternal state* hereafter. The argument then, that St. Paul pursues, is only this, that God might dispense his *extraordinary* favours as he saw fit; and, consequently, eminently distinguish one nation, and pass by others, without the least *injustice*; and that to censure such a way of proceeding, in the *proprietor* and *sovereign disposer* of all things, was arrogant and presumptuous. And from hence we learn, to what questions the words of the text may be *properly* and *justly* applied, *viz.* to such as these; — why God vouchsafes a revelation of his will to *some* nations, and not to *others*? — why, for example, he has not made the christian *universal*? — why does he permit *moral*, and *natural* evil? — why has he not made all creatures of the *highest order*, and communicated to all *equal degrees* of perfection and happiness? nothing of this can be shewn to be contrary to justice, because they are, all, favours, which his creatures have no right to *claim*: And therefore in these, and all other cases of a *like* nature, where justice is not concerned; which have no appearance of *malice* or *cruelty*, but are considerations of *wisdom* only; 'tis very *pertinent* and *rational* to say to an objector, *nay, but, O man, who art thou that repliest against God?* we learn from this discourse,

1<sup>st</sup>. How necessary 'tis that we consider the *uses* to which passages of scripture are applied, and don't argue *generally* from what is only adapted to a *particular* case. This is one reason why texts have been so abominably perverted, and strained to such *absurd* and *unnatural* senses, as are not only contrary to their true design, and the general

neral scope and tenor of the revelation, but strike at the foundation of all religion. S E R M.  
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2dly. Let us cultivate in our minds the highest reverence of God, especially the most honourable apprehensions of his *moral* character; and being persuaded that all his counsels are the result of *infinite wisdom*, and that his will is ever determined by the *highest reason*, let us humbly acquiesce in all the methods of his providence. Survey the work of God, the exquisite beauty and harmony of *the whole*, the admirable connection and subserviency of *the several parts*; nay survey *thy own frame*, the curious and astonishing structure of thy body, the noble faculties and capacities of thy mind; and from the surprizing marks of wisdom and goodness, which thou canst *distinctly* perceive, in *thine own make*, and in the *whole constitution* of things, draw the just and natural inference, *viz.* that the great author and governor of the universe is possesst of these perfections in the most *absolute* and *complete* manner; and, consequently, that all things are contrived and ordered with the same *wise* and *benevolent* view; tho', in particulars, it does not appear *equally*, and in some, perhaps, *not at all* to thy limited understanding.

The improving constantly in our minds worthy notions of God, as a being supremely *wise*, and immutably *just* and *good*, will be attended with very great advantages.——It will restrain that impertinent humour of *scepticism* and *cavilling*, which makes men oppose their ignorance and prejudices to his infinite wisdom.——We shall always consider the Deity, as the most *amiable* and *delightful* object of our contemplation; neither as a weak capricious being, whom we cannot *revere*;



S E R M. *rence*; nor as a rigid tyrannical being, whom we  
V. cannot *love*. — And, finally, our religion, built  
on such principles, will be *wise* and *rational*; and  
there can be no foundation for any of those *super-*  
*stitions* and *enthusiastic* mixtures, which expose  
the most excellent and useful thing in the world to  
*contempt* and *ridicule*.



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# S E R M O N VI.

Of the abuses of free-thinking.

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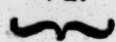
G A L A T. Ver. 13.

*For, brethren, ye have been called unto liberty, only use not liberty for an occasion to the flesh. —*

**T**HERE is not a more valuable blessing S E R M.  
VI.  
in human life, than *liberty*. *Civil liberty* is the basis of all social happiness; and *liberty of conscience* the only foundation of a rational religion. When this latter is restrain'd, we are treated rather like *brutes* than men *i. e.* creatures endued with moral powers, and accountable for their actions: And therefore 'tis one of the chief excellencies of the Christian religion, and very far from the air and spirit of an *impofure*, that it preserves the rights of conscience sacred and inviolable. But because the world is apt to run into *extremes*, the writers of the New Testament, like persons who had a thorough knowledge of human nature, have taken care in this respect, as well as in all others, to guard against *excess* and *irregularity*. Thus *St. Paul*, in the text, advises the *Galatians* not to mistake *licentiousness*



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*ousness* for Christian liberty ; or, in other words, not to imagine, that because they were freed from the expensive, and burthensom observances of the *Mosaic* institution, which are elegantly described as a state of *servitude*, they were discharg'd, likewise, from moral obligations, which are an eternal and immutable law to all rational beings. I intend to consider the subject in a different light, suited to the complection and genius of the *present age* ; and shall enquire into some of the chief abuses of *free-thinking*, by which, it happens, that what is really the peculiar *honour*, and greatest *advantage* of our intelligent nature, becomes a *reproach* to it, and is attended with most *injurious* consequences. And,

1<sup>st</sup>. Embracing the principle of liberty has ended, with many, in *infidelity*, or a disbelief of all religion. 'Tis most evident, that infidelity never more abounded than in this age of *free-enquiry* ; and that those who are most loose in their sentiments with respect to the obligations of religion in general, and of Christianity in particular, are, in profession at least, enemies to *bigotry* and *implicit faith* : Nay, it may be allowed farther, that 'tis likely they would never have gone such a length as to throw off all religion, if they had continued in a blind attachment to the principles of their education, and to established and popular opinions. — Whence now can this arise ? — We who believe that religion, in all the parts of it, is strictly rational, can never allow that it is the natural consequence of a *free* and *impartial examination* of it ; but must suppose, on the contrary, that the more thoroughly 'tis consider'd, and the more nicely weighed in the ballance of true and unbiaffed

unbiaſſed reaſon, it will be the more heartily believed and ſubmitted to: And I doubt not but I ſhall be able to make it appear, that this melancholy event may be ſufficiently accounted for from other cauſes; and that it not only may, but oftentimes does proceed, not from a *ſuperiour underſtanding*, or more *adequate and enlarged views* of things, but from *ignorance, ſuperficial enquiry*, and even from that *prejudice*, and *implicit faith*, which the monopolizers of reaſon and free-thinking ſo loudly diſclaim. I would not be thought, by any thing I am now advancing, to diſcourage the moſt rational and free examination of all religious principles, be they ever ſo *ſacred*, and *venerable*, and tranſmitted down with ever ſo much *awe* and *ſolemnity* by our forefathers; nor would I be thought to aſſert, that any man is oblig'd to receive a revelation, which, upon mature deliberation, appears to be unworthy of God, and repugnant to the reaſon and nature of things: For my only deſign is to point out ſome falſe principles which are all *an abuſe* of the true principle of liberty; and by which, 'tis highly probable, many of the *profefs'd admirers*, and *zealous eſpouſers* of it, have been led to a diſregard both of *revealed*, and *natural* religion. And,

1<sup>ſt</sup>. It frequently happens, that after men have *rejected* ſome principles, which, before, they looked upon as very important, nay eſſential parts of Chriſtianity, upon being convinced that they have as little foundation in the Chriſtian revelation, as in the reaſon of things, they ſtill retain others, equally repugnant both to reaſon, and ſcripture. In ſome time they are perſuaded, either by con-  
verſation, reading, or their own inward reflections,  
that



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that these likewise are *absurd* and *irrational*; but instead of *enquiring*, as becomes honest searchers after truth, *take it for granted*, all the while, that they are real doctrines of Christianity: The consequence of which is, that the Christian religion itself is rejected as false, because such doctrines, which are erroneously reckoned as parts of it, cannot be true. Thus, for instance, a man reasons that God can't be an arbitrary being, who has no regard to the moral fitness of things; or an ill natured being, who, purely for the ostentation of his uncontrollable power and sovereignty, has absolutely determined the final misery and ruin of great numbers of his reasonable creatures; that no miracles can prove such doctrines to be from God, because they are a dishonour to his moral perfections; and, consequently, no religion that teaches and inculcates them, whatever its external attestations are, can be of divine authority: But they pass, *among many*, for important principles of the Christian religion, and therefore Christianity is an *imposture*.

—— But why? May not Christians *misrepresent* the doctrines of the religion which they profess?

—— Or is it fit that any religion should be condemned, before 'tis examin'd, merely from *hearsay*? —— Is this *freedom of thought*, and *rational enquiry*? —— Far from it. 'Tis *rank prejudice* under the cover of that amiable name, and a prejudice, which if it was suffer'd to prevail in all cases, would render it impossible for men to form a right judgment of things, and leave no way, by which to distinguish between *true* and *false religions*: For at this rate, there is nothing so extravagant but may be charg'd upon the *best* and most *unexceptionable*

*Of the abuses of free-thinking.*

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*unexceptionable* scheme in the world, as easily as upon the *worst*; and it will not be in the power of God to make a revelation to his intelligent creatures, that may not be rejected, tho' it be ever so *excellent* in itself, and brings with it the *highest* and *noblest* credentials.

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Again, when men, upon a rational and free enquiry, have found *some* of the principles in which they were educated, and in whose favour they had been a long time prepossessed, to be false; instead of resting here, they draw this most *unjust* and *unnatural* inference, that the *whole* of religion is deceit and imposture. Because they are convinced that *some doctrines*, which they had formerly an high opinion of, are absurd and irrational, therefore *all revelation* must be disgraced and vilified: And if they have any instances of the *corruptions of Priests*, and of their design to enslave mankind, in order to advance their secular dominion, and serve their ambition, and worldly interest by the ignorance and credulity of the common people, tho' at the expence of the eternal and immutable obligations of morality and virtue, (of which, to the *reproach* of our holy religion, examples have been but too frequent) presently Christianity itself is nothing but *Priest-craft*; the invention of *designing men* to keep the world in *awe*, and, by an artful management of their consciences, to *pick their pockets*, and *plunder their estates*. Thus they rush *at once* to a conclusion, without having any premises that will support it; and draw consequences from things that have no *relation* to, or *connection* with each other; and yet, all this while, set up for *close reasoners*, and *free enquirers*! — Never, surely, was the name of  
*rational*



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*rational liberty* so grossly abused! For such a conduct as this, this way of believing upon no foundation at all, and concluding that because one thing is false, another, which is absolutely distinct from it, is so likewise, argues a very *shallow* judgment, great *confusion* of thought, and strong *prejudice*.

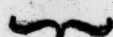
Another abuse of the principle of liberty is this, that some men seem to think, that because they have a right to reject all pretended principles of religion, which are contrary to reason, to the perfections of the supreme being, and the eternal laws of piety and virtue, they may likewise, throw off the belief of every thing that they can't fully account for; and are no more oblig'd, for example, to believe a providence, because the visible course of things is perplex'd and intricate, full of disorder and seeming injustice, and not such, as they imagine it would be, if the universe was govern'd by an absolutely wise and good being; than they are to receive such doctrines as assert that God is a rigorous, severe, and inexorable sovereign, one that delights in the misery of his creatures, &c. and destroy the necessary and unalterable distinction between moral good and evil. This, I say, is another too *common abuse* of the principle of liberty, leading to a disbelief even of the first principles of natural religion; an abuse that argues great *narrowness* of mind, and is what persons of any *compass* and *freedom* of thought can't be guilty of.

They are only *little understandings* that are inclin'd to be *prophane* and *atheistical*, from their ignorance of particular events in the course of providence; whilst those of a more *refined genius*, and the *nicest observation*, always abound in such reflections

reflections as these. “ We can’t describe the S E R M.  
 “ thousandth part of the beauty, and much less VI.  
 “ of the usefulness, of the *minutest* work of the  
 “ great Creator, and shall we pretend to arraign  
 “ and censure the *whole course* of his providential  
 “ government? As far as we *understand* of nature,  
 “ all the parts of it appear to be contrived and  
 “ formed to the utmost advantage; every thing  
 “ has its proper use, and nothing is superfluous  
 “ or defective. And as far as we *understand* of  
 “ *providence*, all its operations are in admirable  
 “ wisdom, and with the most kind and benevo-  
 “ lent design. And is not this a reasonable pre-  
 “ sumption, that what appears *confused* and *intri-*  
 “ *cate* to us is perfectly harmonious and beauti-  
 “ ful, wise, just and good? This is certainly the  
 “ most *natural conclusion* we can make, if we  
 “ consider the narrow compass of the human un-  
 “ derstanding, and the *scantiness* of its most ex-  
 “ tended knowledge; that we can’t comprehend  
 “ the *whole* scheme of God’s government, and,  
 “ consequently, may easily err in judging of *par-*  
 “ *ticular* providences; and that there must, of  
 “ necessity, be some things, in the transactions  
 “ of an *infinite* mind, unfathomable by *finite* rea-  
 “ son.” These will be the reflections of a *judi-*  
 “ *cious* enquirer, who has any knowledge of *bim-*  
 “ *self*, and of *nature*. And all such, on the other  
 “ hand, are but vain *pretenders* to rational freedom,  
 “ who presume to measure *all things* by the standard  
 “ of their imperfect reason, and will admit nothing  
 “ to be true, if they can’t solve *every difficulty* that  
 “ attends it; not even that God governs the world,  
 “ if he does it in a way above their *conceptions*, i. e.  
 “ in other words, in a way, in which ignorant and  
 “ fallible



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VI.



fallible men could not, *themselves*, direct and manage the affairs of it. Such persons, I say, are but vain *pretenders* to free enquiry, which necessarily supposes, as the foundation of it, a *modest* temper of mind, conscious of its own weakness and imperfection; and as it prompts us to examine all things, that are within the *sphere* of our knowledge, with care and impartiality, to reject as false whatever is contrary to plain and certain principles of reason, and embrace nothing as true, but upon proper evidence; so it always restrains from passing a judgment, or determining concerning the truth or falshood of things, about which we have *no ideas*, and which are beyond the *reach* of our present faculties. For all judgments and decisions of this kind, which are *above* our understandings, and consequently can have no rational foundation to support them, are not only the height of *enthusiasm*, but the utmost pitch of *vanity* and *arrogance*.

Some, again, seem to mistake *liberty* for a right to *dispute every thing*, and cavil at all religious principles, which are commonly received, merely to shew that they are *free thinkers*. The great delight of these people, who are often to be met with, is to puzzle a controversy, and start objections against some point or other of revealed religion; not from a desire of having them *considered* and *solved*; but, either to shew their *parts*, or for the sake of embarrassing and distressing weak minds, who having, perhaps, neither capacity, nor leisure for close thinking, can't see thro' the sophistry of their pretended arguments: Such persons are, generally speaking, the farthest that can be from *freedom* and *largeness* of mind: For either they will not stay to hear their objections confuted, which

is the least that can be expected from a *candid* and *ingenuous* spirit; or, if they are gravelled and confounded, make a shift to forget it soon, and repeat the same empty cavils over again, to the next company they meet, with as much unconcernedness and assurance as if they had never received any answer to them. Whether these men are, really, in *sentiment* against religion, or whether they dispute only for their *diversion*, or from a *talkative* humour, or an odd affectation of an *uncommon* spirit of liberty, I will not take upon me to determine. However this be, they can't take it amiss if they are ranked on the side of *infidelity*, because they are always talking against religion, but never defending it.

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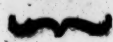
Indeed every one has an undoubted right to debate, in his mind, upon all principles before he receives them, whether they are *true* or *false*; and no wise man will take up any opinion *implicitly*, how powerfully soever it may be recommended by *great names*, and *wordly advantages*. But disputing only for the sake of *cavilling* is not an *honest* and *ingenuous* frame of mind, but *humour*, *pride* and *singularity*. And, yet, every one that knows the world must see, that this practice very much abounds, especially amongst those, who, for want of judgment, have carried their *free-thinking* to such an unreasonable height, as, because they have found some notions, which they once thought parts of christianity, to be false, to believe that there is no principle in it true.

Let me add, that when men are become thus loose in their regards to reveal'd religion, their *vanity* may put them upon striking out *new schemes*, in order to render themselves *considerable*.

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There is a strong itch in mankind after *fame*, especially to be thought eminent for qualities that are *highly esteemed*, as arguments of a *great* and *generous* mind: And this may easily be supposed to be the spring of some men's opposition to the principles of revelation, because they are ever full of it; and solicitous only to urge difficulties, and not at all to offer what may be said in its vindication. They think, perhaps, by this means, to pass for persons whose understandings are enlarged from vulgar prejudices, and who, in their pursuits after knowledge, are under no bias; not influenced by custom, human authority, established and popular opinions, nor by any consideration but the abstract reason and truth of things. And when they have raised plausible objections, and urged them for some time, tho' at first, perhaps, they had no design to hurt christianity by them, yet their thoughts being continually turned against it, and never employed in its defense, they may come at last to think that their objections have some weight; and by degrees, to imagine that they are more and more important; and in the end, that they are of sufficient strength to overthrow the christian religion, and prove it an imposture.— And thus what was, at first, only *vanity*, may, by degrees, be confirmed and settled *infidelity*.— And, to forward this melancholy effect, several other circumstances may concur. The *opposition* such persons frequently meet with will make them more eager in opposing, more tenacious of what they have advanced, and inclined to maintain it: It will put them upon *strengthening* their objections as much as possible; upon finding out *new salvos* to remove the difficulties

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ties that lie in their way ; and more subtle *quirks* and *evasions*, whereby to render the positive evidences of the truth of christianity weak and inconclusive. — Till what they asserted and urged, for a long time, only for *cavilling* sake, or from *the spirit of contradiction* that is too natural to eager disputants, they think themselves obliged in *honour* to stand by, as their own *genuine* sentiments.

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I shall conclude this head with observing, that there are many who profess a great value and zeal for free and impartial enquiry into religious opinions, and perhaps know something, in *general*, of the reasonableness and excellency of it, and yet have but a confused notion of the *principle itself*, and understand very little either of its *true nature*, or *extent* ; and others who admire it merely because 'tis espoused by those, whom they esteem as the more *ingenious* and *sensible* part of mankind. Both these, therefore, are likely to follow, *implicitly*, such whom they regard as the greatest *patrons* and *defenders* of liberty : And, consequently, if in the circle of their acquaintance, it happens to be the character of an enlarged and generous spirit, not only to take nothing upon trust, but to question and dispute the truth of every thing that is generally looked upon as a sacred principle of religion ; they are in danger of mistaking *Scepticism* and *cavilling* for rational and impartial freedom of thought. For having no fixed sentiments of their own, there is no way left them but to follow the example of the most *noted free-thinkers*, to believe just *as much* as they do, and *no more* ; — and this, whether it be *any thing*, or *nothing*,

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thing, is liberty. — Thus may *liberty* be made to stand for *bigotry* and *implicit faith*; — an impartial examination into the nature and evidences of religion may signify *having no religion at all*; — and men may assume the character of being open to conviction, and free honest searchers after truth, who are *indolent* and *make no enquiry*.

2. Another abuse of the principle of liberty is this, that it has led many, who have not proceeded so far as a *downright disbelief* of all religion, to pay no regard, or at most, but a slight and trifling regard, to *instrumental* and *positive* duties. Impartial enquirers into things have discovered the folly and mischievous consequences of *superstition*, and *enthusiasm*; that *reading*, *hearing*, *praying*, &c. can answer no valuable purposes, farther than as they influence men to govern their passions, and behave with justice and universal benevolence to their fellow creatures; and that placing the whole of religion in *inward impulses*, a *warm and lively imagination*, and *heats*, and *raptures of devotion*, has been of vast difference to the cause of solid and useful virtue. And, undoubtedly, so far our rational and free enquiries have been of great use to us, by teaching us wherein the substance of true religion consists, and guarding against dangerous errors.

But from hence it has been inferred, that the *instrumental* duties of piety are not only *unnecessary*, but *hurtful*; and that an inward veneration and esteem of the Deity, improved by frequent and serious meditation, is sufficient, without any outward stated Acts of worship, and all that is fit for us to perform, or our maker to expect. — But how does this follow? — Is it a just conclusion,

clusion, that because *superstition* and *enthusiasm* are mischievous things, therefore a *rational devotion*, that is allowed to have no goodness in it but as 'tis subservient to moral purposes, can't be helpful to us in the pursuit of virtue? By no means. There is not the least *colour* of reason in it, nor can there be a more *forced* and *unnatural* inference: For *stated* and *solemn* addresses to God have a direct tendency to fix, in our minds, an habitual reverence of his perfections, a strong sense of our necessary dependance upon him, and continual obligations to him. And these ends are likely to be more effectually served by our making *immediate applications* to the supreme being, (in which we have the awe of his omniscience a witness to our most secret thoughts, and of his almighty power that can dreadfully punish dissimulation and falsehood, to restrain us from carelessness and levity) than by our *loose, occasional*, and cursory reflections. There is, moreover, this undeniable advantage arising from *public* and *social* worship, that it preserves in the world a general sense of a Deity, and a providence, and of the grand obligations of religion.

Again our reason, upon an impartial enquiry into the nature of things, will inform us, that *moral* duties are infinitely preferable to those of a *positive* and *ritual* nature; because the former are essentially good, and of eternal immutable authority in all ages, and under every dispensation of religion; whereas the latter are required with this view that they may be subservient to these, and consequently, are only so far valuable, as they answer this their ultimate end; and may be changed and varied as circumstances alter, and

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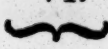


according to the particular genius and necessities of different ages and nations.

But can it be concluded from hence, which seems to be the too prevailing humour of this free, inquisitive age, that *positive* duties deserve *no* regard from us? — Are they to be *entirely* neglected, because *moral* precepts are of prior obligation, and superior excellence? To say this, is, in effect, to assert that one thing can't be *good* because another is better; and because that other is *more useful*, this can be of *no service* at all. In truth, besides that 'tis an *eternal* rule of right, that God should be obey'd in every discovery of his will, whether it relates to things of a *positive*, or *moral* nature; besides this, I say, the *positive* duties of our holy religion have a natural aptitude to strengthen and enforce *moral* obligations, and for that reason, ought to be highly valued by us. So that the notion of the *absolute insignificancy* of instrumental and instituted religion is as much an extreme, as the making the *chief part* of virtue and true goodness to consist in it; and both proceed, in a great measure, from the same principle, *viz. a slight judgment, and superficial enquiry.* And the *ill effects* of this notion are too visible. For those who have neglected all *external* religion, have been so far from improving, as might reasonably be expected since they profess to have nothing else to mind, that, except in a few instances, they rather decline in their zeal for the practice of that *moral* virtue, which they are so forward to magnify to the *utter disparagement* of every thing else; they have, I say, rather declin'd in their zeal for the practice even of *moral* virtue, in proportion as they have grown cold
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Of the abuses of free-thinking.

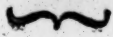
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and remits with respect to the *solemn worship* of SERM.
their maker, and the *instrumental* duties of pi- VI.
ety. 

3dly. Freedom of thought, and impartial enquiry into the principles of religion, have been *abused* and *perverted*, in the present age, by degenerating into a *light trifling* frame of mind, and a humour of treating sacred things with *ridicule*. With people who affect this way, liberty is nothing else but a *free bold* manner of treating all subjects *ludicrously*, and turning them into a jest. They have a great inclination to shew their *wit*, especially upon points that afford the *least room* for it; for this discovers an *uncommon* genius: And, therefore, because religion is the *gravest* thing in the world, they resolve to be *merry* with it; and think it a most *meritorious* action to laugh at what the generality of the world esteem and reverence, and endeavour to put all the *wise* and *virtuous* part of mankind out of countenance. But such *empty triflers* ought to know, that there can be no true wit which has not *reason* for the foundation of it; that ridiculing what is in itself *good*, *useful*, and *venerable*, fixes a certain reproach upon him that attempts it, either upon his *understanding*, or his *morals*; that jesting with things of the highest consequence is *folly* and *madness*; that 'tis an easy matter, by *misrepresenting*, to make any thing appear ridiculous; and consequently, that this talent is so far from being a demonstration that the person who possesses it is a *wit*, as 'tis from being an evidence of his *good breeding*, that in violation of all the rules of *decency*, he banters and treats with *scurrility* the established

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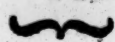
religion of his country, and that which all around him have a high value for. But I hasten to a conclusion.

From what has been said we learn, that there are no things in themselves so excellent, but what are capable of being *abus'd*; and by their natural consequences ever so friendly and beneficial to mankind, may be made to produce the most mischievous effects. This possibility of the corruption of what is most wise and good necessarily results from the principle of liberty, which God hath planted in human nature; which, at the same time, that it supposes, that 'tis in a man's power to *improve* his faculties, and the advantages he enjoys, must suppose, that 'tis in his power, likewise, so to *darken* his judgment by wilful *negligence*, and want of *consideration*, and giving an unbounded scope to *sensual* and *irregular* passions, as to confound the very plain and unalterable distinction that there is, in the nature of things, between truth and falsehood, and between moral good and evil. And as this great and melancholy abuse is no just objection to the *wisdom* and *goodness* of the Creator, so neither is it any argument against the *excellency* and *usefulness* of the things themselves; any more than 'tis an argument against the *necessary supports* of life, that they are frequently abused to excess and intemperance; or against *reason itself*, that 'tis sometimes employed to undermine the foundations of religion and virtue, to give false and plausible colours to vice and immorality, and in contriving such schemes of injustice, fraud, and tyranny, as are subversive of the peace and happiness of the world.

Indeed

Indeed, strictly speaking, perverting the nature of things, in every instance, is nothing else but an *abuse of reason*; and therefore, if it concludes any thing, it must be against that *noble faculty*, which is our chief dignity, and only superiority to the animal creation. And we are to consider farther, that the *real nature* of things is not, in the least, altered by our erroneous sentiments, or irregular behaviour; and that, if we would form a right judgment in any case, we must carefully distinguish between the *natural tendency* of a principle, and the evils it may *occasionally* produce, through the ignorance, prejudice, and wilful perverseness of mankind.

Thus, for instance, 'tis generally allowed, that *religion* is not, in itself, ever the less *amiable* or *useful*, for having been so horribly corrupted and deformed, as to make it questionable, whether under some of the worst *depravations* of it, it has not been quite as bad as no religion at all. The matter of fact is incontestable. It has been placed in *faith* and *outward profession* in idle *ridiculous* ceremonies, *absurd* and *unintelligible* doctrines, in a *slavish submission* to the dictates of cunning and designing men, and even in such a *blind raging* and *injurious* zeal, as has prompted bigots and enthusiasts, of all parties, to violate the great laws of justice and charity, which are of eternal and necessary obligation. Thus, instead of being represented as a *reasonable service*, it has been taught, in effect, that we must become *brutes*, and renounce our *understandings*, in order to be religious; and that we must throw off humanity, all regard to the immutable differences of things, and the moral

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ral perfections of our maker, in order to serve him *acceptably*.

In like manner, tho' the exercise of free enquiry in matters of religion has been grossly and shamefully abused, we ought not, upon this account, to entertain the *worse* opinion of the principle itself, because it is, indeed, the chief glory of our nature, and the very end for which we were endued with reason. For if the great Creator had designed that we should submit *implicitly* to established opinions, without examining and judging for our selves, reason must not only be *impertinent* and *useless*, but an *absurdity* and a *contradiction*; since if we make any use of this faculty, and follow its most plain and natural directions, we can't suffer ourselves to be *thus imposed on*. Again freedom of thought, and a honest impartial examination into the nature and evidence of religious principles, is absolutely essential to a *rational* faith: For there can no more be true faith without *evidence*, than there can without *ideas*; or in other words, men deserve no more to be commended for believing an *intelligible* proposition they know not *why*, than they do for believing what they know *nothing at all* of; from whence it follows, that this liberty of judging for themselves is one of the most *sacred and unalienable* rights of mankind. To this we may add, that the exercise of it, in the *utmost latitude* of rational enquiry, without any corrupt prejudice to bias and mislead the understanding, any undue reverence of human authority, or attachment to party schemes, and indeed been influenced by nothing but plain reason and scripture, is the *only way*

way in which *truth* can revive ; whereas without S E R M. it, men must *necessarily* continue in their *errors* VI. and *vices*, and there will not be so much as a *possibility* of a reformation. Accordingly, in proportion as it has prevail'd, it has been of vast service to the cause of Christianity, by representing its doctrines in a more *consistent* view, and establishing its authority upon the *strongest* and most *unexceptionable* evidence. And withal 'tis a principle the most *honourable* that can be to our holy religion, describing it as recommending to men, with an openness and frankness *peculiar to truth*, the use and improvement of their rational faculties ; and not only *inviting to*, but *encouraging* the utmost freedom of debate ; because, as it has a good foundation to support it, it can stand the test of *sober* and *impartial* reason, and receive no *real injury* by all the skill and sophistry of its opposers. But what a *disagreeable* and *unworthy* notion does it give of Christianity, to represent it as raising its triumphs upon the *ruines* of our rational nature, and placing the substance of religion in *enthusiasm* and *implicit faith* ; and, consequently, as setting itself upon a level with *impostures* and *false religions*, which will not bear the light, and therefore always shelter themselves under the covert of ignorance and darkness.

Since then this principle is the *supreme prerogative* of our intelligent being, essential to all *rational* religion, and, in a peculiar manner, honourable and advantageous to the *Christian* ; let us, notwithstanding *accidental abuses* (to which the best things are liable) constantly assert and vindicate

S E R M. vindicate it. And let us be sure ever to remember, that tho' we are *called to liberty*, both these rules have the same foundation in *reason*, and are of equal authority in the *Christan revelation*, *Stand fast in the liberty wherewith Christ hath made you free; but use not your liberty for an occasion to the flesh.*



S E R M O N VII.

Of Myſteries.

D E U T E R. XXIX. 29.

The ſecret things belong unto the Lord our God; but thoſe things which are reveal'd belong unto us, and to our children for ever that we may do all the words of this law.

I N the beginning of this chapter, *Mofes* exhorts the *Iſraelites* to be faithful to God, and conſtant in their obedience to his law, as the way to engage the protection of providence, and make them a prosperous and flourishing people. He, afterwards, denounces very ſevere judgments againſt them, if they revolted from the ſervice of the true God, and imitated the corruption and wickedneſs of idolatrous nations; judgments in which the divine power and vengeance would be remarkably viſible; ſo *exemplary* and *terrible*, that *all nations* ſhould enquire into the cauſe of them, and ſay, *Wherefore hath the Lord done thus unto this land? what meaneth the heat of this great anger?* To which it might be answer'd, that the

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Ver. 24.



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Ver. 15,  
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the reason why they were punished in so *singular* a manner was, that their iniquities were exceedingly aggravated; that they had sinned against a clear revelation of the will of God, and renounced their allegiance and duty to him, notwithstanding they were favoured with extraordinary and peculiar privileges: *They have forsaken the covenant of the LORD God of their fathers, which he made with them when he brought them forth out of the land of Egypt. For they went and served other Gods, and worshipped them; Gods whom they knew not. — And the anger of the LORD was kindled against this land, to bring upon it all the curses that are written in this book. And the Lord rooted them out of their land in anger, and in wrath, and in great indignation, and cast them into another land, as it is this day.* But because it might be ask'd farther, why he interpos'd to bring such grievous calamity and destruction upon them while he spared other very *corrupt, idolatrous, and wicked* nations, 'tis added in the words of the text, that we are not able, in innumerable cases, to fix the *precise reasons* of the divine conduct, and therefore should not *perplex and bewilder* our selves with fruitless enquiries of this kind; *The secret things belong unto the LORD our God, &c.*

A very learned commentator supposes, that there might be another question started (besides that mentioned in the 24th verse) of which we have no particular account, *viz.* Whether the *Israelites* would ever, in fact, become thus degenerate, and bring themselves, by their guilt, into such deplorable and dreadful circumstances; and that *Moses*, in the text, checks this *idle inquisitive* humour, which makes men anxious about futurity,

ty, and to be acquainted with events that don't concern them. But these things are not of much importance ; for if we should not be able to fix to what it immediately refers, the text has, in general, an easy and obvious sense, and naturally suggests several useful things to be the subject of the ensuing discourse. As,

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I. That 'tis a *vain* and *foolish curiosity* to enquire into things that we can't comprehend, and with respect to which we have no light to direct us, either from reason, or revelation.

II. That there are, *properly speaking*, no *mysteries* in religion. *The secret things belong unto the LORD our God*, and only things *reveal'd*, things that are plain and intelligible, *belong to us*.

III. That the great end of revelation is *practice*, the practice of solid and substantial virtue ; *that we may do all the words of this law*. From whence it necessarily follows,

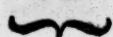
IV. That no doctrines, which, in the least encourage *immorality*, can be parts of a divine revelation. And in the

*Fifth* and last place, that ~~the importance~~ of the several doctrines of revelation is to be judged of by this rule, *viz.* their tendency to promote and establish a becoming regard to *purity* and *true goodness*.

I. 'Tis a *vain* and *foolish curiosity* to enquire into things that we can't comprehend, and with respect to which we have no light to direct us, either from reason, or revelation. Of this kind are the *secret counsels* and *decrees* of God, and *future events* in which we have no manner of concern.

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There are many truths that are necessarily hid from us, and wrapp'd up in close *impenetrable* darkness. Such is the narrowness and limitation of our present faculties, that we are ignorant of the end and uses of innumerable things in the *constitution* of *nature*; and particular events in the *conduct* of *providence* confound and puzzle us, because we have but very loose and imperfect conceptions of its whole design. And yet the *pride* of man would grasp at every thing. It sets itself to judge, or rather to make childish and groundless *conjectures* where it knows nothing; takes it amiss that the All-wise creator has not condescended to reveal to it all his *secrets*; and can't persuade itself to use and improve the knowledge it *has*, for the uneasiness it feels, and its impatient and eager desire after what it *has not*. Such a temper as this is very *perverse* and *unreasonable*. For 'tis certainly the *true wisdom* of mankind (as there are bounds set to the human understanding, beyond which it cannot pass) to pursue those truths which are within the reach of their faculties, and digest and cultivate that useful knowledge which is of the highest importance to them; and to be thankful that their rational powers are of so large a compass and extent; and most *unaccountable folly* to delight to grope in the dark; to leave the plain dictates of reason, and follow the wild roving of imagination and fancy; to attempt to argue where they have no principles to proceed upon, and unravel inexplicable mysteries; and to repine at not being omniscient, or able to comprehend all the designs of an infinite mind.

Our blessed Saviour discourag'd this idle, trifling curiosity upon all occasions, and very wisely; because

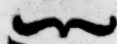
## Of Mysteries.

III

cause it naturally leads to *scepticism* and *cavilling*, and diverts the mind from a pursuit of solid wisdom, to *amusing* and *useless* speculations. Thus when one (who was only concern'd in the solution of that grand question, what HE should *do to be sav'd*) came and enquir'd of him, *Lord, are there few that be sav'd?* instead of giving a direct answer, which would have humoured this spirit of *impertinence*, he instructed the multitude what was their proper business, and most important interest: *Strive to enter in at the strait gate, for many will seek to enter in, and shall not be able.* Luke viii. 23, 24. Other instances might be alledged to the same purpose, but this is sufficient to show, that, in the judgment of this divine teacher, such enquiries were vain and unprofitable, and argued a *light unsteady* temper, and a mind intent upon *trifles*, instead of being desirous of that useful knowledge which is suited to its faculties, and has an immediate influence upon its happiness. Let it therefore be our chief care to make a right improvement of what we do know of the plain directions of our reason, and the extraordinary light that is afforded us by divine revelation; and let us not aspire after things out of our reach, and so neglect the substance, and hunt after shadows. Let us upon the evidences we have which are very numerous and uncontestable, and of the utmost force with every considerate mind, let us, I say, upon the evidences we have of the unerring wisdom, inflexible justice, and most perfect goodness of the great author and governor of the universe, acquiesce, without murmuring, in all his disposals, and entertain an honourable opinion of all the methods of his providence: In this our reason will  
*assist*



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*assist* us; so far the inference is *easy* and *natural*. But in attempting to account for every thing, and trace out the whole scheme of God's providential operation, we assume a task that is far above our *capacities*, and *disquiet* ourselves *in vain*. We may *imagine*, and *guess*, and indulge a thousand little groundless *fancies*, but shall find it impracticable, in numberless cases, to form *just* and *certain* conclusions.

The 2d observation from the text is, that there are, properly speaking, *no mysteries* in religion. *The secret*, i. e. the mysterious *things*, belong *unto the LORD our God*, and only *things reveal'd*, things that are plain and intelligible, belong *to us*. A *mystery*, in the scripture sense of it, is a thing that natural reason could not discover, and, consequently, which must have been unknown, if God had not reveal'd it: And of this kind, I own, there are several doctrines in the Christian religion; before the revelation was given they were mysteries; but cease to be mysteries now they are reveal'd. Accordingly Christ says to his disciples, that unto them it was *given* to know the mystery of the kingdom of God. Again, St. Paul speaks of the revelation of the mystery *which was kept secret since the world began*; and to the Corinthians, *Behold I shew you a mystery*. All which passages evidently imply, that how dark soever these things were before, they are now plain and intelligible, how else could they be *shewn*, *reveal'd*, and *known*? And this will appear more undeniably, if we consider the things themselves. For what can be more clear than the two *mysteries* St. Paul speaks of, *viz.* preaching the gospel to the *Gentiles*; and this proposition, *We shall not all sleep,*

Mark iv.

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Rom. xvi.

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1 Cor. xv.

51.

*sleep, or die, but we shall all, i. e. those who are found alive at the coming of Christ, be chang'd?* They could not have been known if they had not been reveal'd, and, consequently, before that time were *proper mysteries*; but, in themselves, are *plain truths* adapted to all understandings, and have not the least *obscurity* or *intricacy* in them. The same may be said of the *parable* of the *sower*, which our saviour refers to; it was *a mystery of the kingdom of God*, while it was conceal'd and hid under a dark parable; but afterwards so clear, that no man of common reflection could find any difficulty in it.

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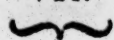
Now from this account 'tis most certain, that *mysteries*, i. e. things which reason cannot discover, and which are not reveal'd, are, in the language of the text, *the secret things that belong to God*, and what we have nothing at all to do with; or, in other words, tho' certain things are parts of our religion that *were* mysteries, 'tis not our duty to believe or practise any thing that is *still* a mystery. To believe doctrines that are *still* mysterious is to believe without *ideas*, to believe what we know nothing of; but this, in the nature of the thing, is *impossible*. We may, indeed, believe that there is *some general truth* contain'd in propositions which we don't understand, and so far our faith may be rational, because we know what we believe; but of the propositions themselves we can believe nothing *particularly* because we understand nothing: Nor can greater dishonour be done to the infinite wisdom of God, than by supposing, that he has made it a part of our religious obligations, only to believe, in general, that there is some truth disguis'd under unintelligible terms,

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to which we have no ideas. For this is making no *revelation* at all, but leaving things in absolute *darkness*; 'tis only shewing men their own ignorance, and perhaps may be look'd upon as upbraiding and insulting them with it, but affords no light by which they may be directed to their duty and happiness.

And if we examine the doctrines of the Christian religion, we shall find in fact, that they are plain and easy truths, and that as we cannot in *reason*, we are not oblig'd by *revelation*, to carry our faith one jot beyond our understanding. —  
 “ That God made, and supports, and governs  
 “ the world, that he is eternal, independent, un-  
 “ changeable, perfectly wise, just and good;”  
 which are fundamental truths of natural religion, explain'd and enforc'd by christianity; “ that he  
 “ sent his son into the world to be the instructor  
 “ and saviour of mankind, that he has made him  
 “ *Lord of all*, and *will*, by him, *judge the world*  
 “ *in righteousness*; that all men shall be rais'd at  
 “ the great day with immortal and incorruptible  
 “ bodies; the righteous be rewarded with *eternal*  
 “ *life*, and the wicked punished with *everlasting*  
 “ *destruction*;” these, likewise, which are the peculiar principles of the gospel, have nothing *abstruse* and *mysterious* in them, but are express'd in the most *natural* and *obvious* terms. If you say, that you can't account for the *manner* of God's creating the world, or for the *manner* in which he exists every where, of the general resurrection, and the like, I answer, 'tis no part of your *religion* to account for it. — Where the mystery begins, religion ends. — For I would ask, does the most warm and forward *enthusiast* pretend to believe

believe more than that these things are true? Does he believe any thing at all with respect to the *manner* of them? Nay, is not his urging that 'tis mysterious and incomprehensible a demonstration, that he, *himself*, knows, he can believe nothing *particularly* about it?

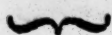
S E R M.  
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'Tis yet more strange to talk of *mysterious precepts*, than of unintelligible doctrine; for laws that are not *understood*, 'tis most certain, can never be obey'd. What is design'd for a rule of action should be as plain as possible, and if it be intended for an universal rule, it must be adapted to the *lowest capacities* of mankind: and the enjoining *incomprehensible*, is the very same absurdity, and the same degree of injustice, as enjoining *impracticable* duties. Should it be ask'd, whether God may not command things, which we can't assign particular reasons for? I answer, that I very much question whether any of this kind can be produced from revelation; but if it could, the *command itself* would be no mystery, for then 'tis impossible it should be observ'd; it would, in truth, be a command to *do nothing*; but the only mystery would be, *why God gave such a command*, which your religion had no manner of concern with.

'Tis indeed very surprizing, that mankind, in all ages, have been so *fond* of mysteries; that the *crafty* and *designing*, who make a gain of the credulity of the multitude, should use all their art and interest to propagate them, is indeed natural enough; but why should the more *honest* and *disinterested* part of the people plead so zealously for them? Whence comes it to pass, that when they choose to see their way plain before them in all



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other cases, they should affect to be *without light* in matters of religion? Religion is of vastly greater importance than the common affairs of life, and this they readily acknowledge; and yet they seem to like it the *better*, the *less* they understand it. Such a conduct is very unaccountable, because there can, one would think, be no motive to it. — Mysteries yield neither *pleasure* nor *profit*. — For as, with respect to the works of *nature*, all our pleasure arises from the *perception* of beauty, harmony, and usefulness; and however we may imagine innumerable *secret* beauties which we have not discover'd, yet till they are *known* they afford no *real satisfaction*, nor can we reap any *advantage* from them; 'tis just the same with respect to *mysteries* in religion; we can neither be delighted nor *profited* by them because we don't understand them, *i. e.* in other words they are really *nothing at all* to us. — Nay we can't so much as *admire* them; because admiration necessarily supposes, that we have a knowledge of the *grandeur*, or of the *worth* and *excellency* of the object. The utmost that can be said therefore is, that we are *confounded* and *puzzled*. — And is there any pleasure in that, or any advantage merely in being in the *dark*, and having *no ideas*?

However, if this were all, a man would only prove himself a *weak* (and might at the same time be an *innocent*) enthusiast, by supposing things that are, in truth, *nothing* to him, to be important parts of revelation. But when *mysteries* are propagated with zeal, and impos'd on conscience, when for the sake of what is allow'd to be *incomprehensible*, the plain and indispensable obligations of justice and charity are infring'd and violated,

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## Of Mysteries.

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(of which the history of the Christian church, in almost every age, affords many flagrant examples) 'tis then our duty to oppose an error which makes *religion* contemptible, and strikes at the foundation of *Christianity*, and, indeed, of all *good morals*. And this can't be so effectually done as by shewing that there are no mysteries in religion, and that of what we don't understand, we can't know whether it be good for any thing or no; 'tis in fact useless and does not deserve our zeal; nor if we did understand it would that alone be sufficient, unless it was a doctrine of some importance to the cause of virtue, and the happiness of mankind, and consequently worthy of God. I shall only add, that there is a great difference between a *mystery*, and a direct *absurdity* and *contradiction*, such as *transubstantiation*, and *other doctrines* which have been screen'd under that more venerable name; for mysteries are only things that we know *nothing at all* of, the other things that we certainly know to be *false*; — the former we only *don't* understand, the latter we see *can't* be understood. But I proceed to

The 3<sup>d</sup> observation, *viz.* that the great end of revelation is *practice*; the practice of solid and substantial virtue. *Those things which are reveal'd*, says *Moses*, *belong to us, and to our children for ever, that we may do all the words of this law*. The design of revelation, I have already shewn, could not be to *confound* the understandings of men with *deep* and *inexplicable* mysteries; for this, instead of giving a revelation to assist and instruct mankind, is only to bewilder them, and lead them into a maze; and it must be absolutely unbecoming the infinite wisdom of God, to be at



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VII.James ii.  
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the expence of miracles, and sending an extraordinary messenger from heaven, merely to *nonplus* and *puzzle* human reason, and make ignorant men *stare*. Again, it can't be thought to be the sole and ultimate view of revelation, to give right speculative notions of the most important principles, or furnish the understanding with just ideas even of *moral* truths; for what does the most excellent kind of knowledge signify if it be not digested, and reduced to its proper use? or how is it at all more valuable than *harmless error*, and a *pleasing delusion*? Besides, men may be great proficients in the *theory* of religion, may understand it thoroughly, and be able to argue every part of it with an uncommon *acuteness*, and *strength* of judgment, and be not at all the wiser or the better for it; they may, notwithstanding, be very *miserable* in themselves and *injurious* to others: For even *the devils believe and tremble*. But to aim at promoting and encouraging the practice of virtue by a revelation, the practice, I say, of universal, generous, and godlike virtue, which is the perfection of human nature, and inseparably connected both with private and public happiness, is a truly *noble* design, worthy the *greatest* and *best* of characters, even that of the All-wise governor, the supremely beneficent and compassionate father of mankind: And that this is really the great end proposed by the christian revelation, must be allowed by all who have examin'd it with any care, and will be seen the more clearly, the more thoroughly it is understood,

The greatest part of Christianity is only a *reinforcement* of the *religion of nature*, consisting of *moral* precepts which were doubtless intended to be

be the rule of our actions, and strengthening the arguments for a virtuous life which *reason* suggests: And if we consider its *peculiar* doctrines, we shall find that they are all calculated, wisely calculated to serve the same most excellent design of establishing moral obligations, and promoting universal purity. This, for instance, is the design of the *death* of Christ, and the *redemption* purchas'd for us *by his blood*; for he gave himself Tit. ii. 14. *for us, that he might redeem us from all iniquity, and purify unto himself a peculiar people, zealous of good works: —* of his *resurrection*, and the hope that is thereby afforded us of a glorious resurrection to life and immortality; for if we are *risen with Christ*, we ought to seek those things which are above, Col. iii. 1. *where Christ sitteth at the right hand of God*; and to have our conversation in heaven, from whence we Phil. iii. 20. 21. *look for the Saviour the Lord Jesus Christ, who shall change our vile body, that it may be fashion'd like unto his glorious body. —* Again, the natural influence, and, consequently, the ultimate end of the promises of the gospel is, that by them we may be partakers of a divine nature, escaping the corruption that is in the world through lust. Having these promises, dearly beloved, let us cleanse ourselves from 2 Pet. i. 4. *all filthiness of the flesh and of the spirit, perfecting* 2 Cor. vii. 1. *holiness in the fear of God. —* And to mention no more, do we believe the doctrine of the universal judgment? When the Lord Jesus shall be re- 2 Thes. i. 7 — 10. *veal'd from heaven, with his mighty angels, in flaming fire, to take vengeance on them that know not God, and obey not the gospel; —* and when he shall come to be glorified in his saints, and admir'd in all them that believe? — What manner of persons 2 Pet. iii. 11. *ought we, then, to be in all holy conversation and*



S E R M. *godliness?* Is it not a most natural and forcible conclusion, that *seeing we look for such things, we should be diligent that we may be found of him in peace, without spot and blameless?*  
 VII.  
 Ver. 14.

And this, which must be the view of all divine revelations, and which the grand doctrines of Christianity have a peculiar tendency to promote, is besides expressly declar'd to be its chief design. All hopes of happiness, but what are built on *purity of heart and a virtuous life*, are, according to the Christian scheme, vain and delusory, and will certainly end in disappointment and confusion — Dost thou expect to be saved by thy faith and outward profession? Hear what Christ  
 Matt. vii. himself says, *Not every one that saith unto me, Lord, Lord, shall enter into the kingdom of heaven, but he that doth the will of my Father who is in heaven.*  
 21.  
 James ii. *What doth it profit, my brethren, faith St. James, 14—17. tho' a man say he hath faith, and have not works, can faith save him? If a brother or sister be naked, and destitute of daily food, and one of you say unto them depart in peace, be ye warm'd, and fill'd, notwithstanding ye give them not those things which are needful to the body, what doth it profit? even so faith if it hath not works, is dead being alone. —*  
 Or dost thou expect to be rewarded for a strong, warm and lively zeal? *Tho' thou give thy body to be burned, and hast not charity, it profiteth nothing.*  
 1 Cor. xiii. 3. — Church privileges are a vain security; —  
 Nay, the outward appearance of some uncommon virtue, and even extraordinary gifts will not avail:  
 1 Cor. xiii. 1, 2. *For tho' I speak with the tongues of men and angels, tho' I have the gift of prophecy, and understand all mysteries, and all knowledge, and tho' I have all faith so that I could remove mountains, and bestow all*  
 all

*all my goods to feed the poor, and have not charity, I am nothing.* Many, says our blessed saviour, <sup>S E R M. VII.</sup> will say to me in that day, Lord, Lord, have we <sup>Mat. vii.</sup> not prophefied in thy name, and in thy name have cast <sup>22, 23.</sup> out devils, and in thy name done many wonderful works? St. Luke adds, *we have eaten and drank in thy presence, and thou hast taught in our streets.* <sup>Luke xiii.</sup> And <sup>26.</sup> then will I profess unto them, I never knew you, depart from me, ye that work iniquity. With these things exactly agree the general accounts we have of religion in the writings of the New Testament: *The unrighteous shall not inherit the kingdom of God.* <sup>1 Cor. vi.</sup> — *Blessed are they that do his commandments,* <sup>9.</sup> *that they may have a right to the tree of life.* — *Pure* <sup>Rev. xxii. 14.</sup> *religion and undefil'd before God, even the father, is* <sup>James i.</sup> *this, to visit the fatherless and widows in their affliction, and to keep himself unspotted from the world.* <sup>27.</sup> — So that the sum of religion, under the gospel, is the same with what is very elegantly and strongly exprefs'd by the prophet Micah, *He hath shewed thee, O man, what is good, and what doth the Lord require of thee, but to do justly, and to love mercy, and to walk humbly with thy God?* <sup>Mic. vi. 8.</sup> From this head, viz. that the great end of revelation is *practice*, the practice of solid and substantial virtue, it necessarily follows,

4. That no doctrines, which in the least encourage *immorality*, can be parts of a divine revelation — Doctrines of this kind can't be charg'd on christianity, which prescribes the noblest system of morals, without making it contradict itself. — Nor, in the nature of the thing, can they belong to any religion that is of divine original, because of the absolute wisdom, and spotless purity of the great governor of the world. — Even miracles



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miracles themselves can't prove such doctrines to be true, which are *necessarily* false, dishonourable to the moral attributes of God, and inconsistent with the true perfection and happiness of mankind: But this point is so exceeding clear that I need not enlarge on it; and therefore,

In the last place, if the great end of revelation be to promote a good life, it is an undeniable consequence, that the importance of the several doctrines of it must be judged of by this rule, *viz.* their tendency to establish a becoming regard to purity and virtue. And let any man ask himself seriously what those doctrines are; whether they are not those *plain principles* in which all good Christians are agreed; and whether the most *celebrated controversies*, which have produced so much confusion and violence in the Christian world, have not been about such things, as have very *little*, if *any* connection with practical religion? — Let him ask himself of what use are disputes about *personalities, subsistences, the hypostatical union*, and other famous points which distract the minds of the vulgar; and which the *learned* themselves can't tell how to explain. The scripture has none of these *dark phrases*, but is a *plain intelligible rule*. Let us therefore study *that* more, and *scholastic explanations* of it less, which have, in many places, darkened the text, and *made* difficulties where they *found* none. And let us value our brethren, not for being of the same side with us in matter of *doubtful opinion*, and the *subtilties* of *controversial divinity*, but for their *piety, justice, charity*, and the fruits of *universal righteousness* that appear in their conversations. I shall conclude this discourse with two passages of scripture. The one is from  
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 teach otherwise, and consent not to wholsom words,  
 even the words of our Lord Jesus Christ, and to the 1 Tim. vi.  
 doctrine which is according to godliness, he is proud, 3—5.

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The other are the words of St. James; But be ye James i.  
 doers of the word, and not hearers only, deceiving 13—25.  
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 word, and not a doer, he is like unto a man behold-  
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 what manner of man he was. But whoso looketh  
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VII.

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## S E R M O N VIII.

*Agur's prayer; or the middle condition of life, generally, the most eligible.*

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PROV. XXX. Part of the 8th, and the whole 9th Verse.

— *Give me neither poverty nor riches, feed me with food convenient for me: lest I be full and deny thee, and say, who is the Lord? or lest I be poor and steal, and take the name of my God in vain.*

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**T**HESE words (as we are inform'd in the first verse of the chapter) were spoken by *Agur* to *Itbiel* and *Ucal*, who very probably, were two of his scholars, that came to him to be instructed in the principles of true wisdom: He begins with modestly declaring his own insufficiency for so great an undertaking, and recommends as the foundation of all useful knowledge, an *humble* temper of mind, sensible of the natural weakness of human understanding, and the imperfection of its highest improvements; which he argues, verse the 4th, from our ignorance of the works of nature: And therefore, in the

the two following verses, he advises his pupils to S E R M. VIII. make it their principal study to understand *the will of God*, which is, of all knowledge, the most important, and of the greatest use in human life; and in all their enquiries of this kind, to confine themselves to what God had *revealed*: Then he introduces the words of the text, in the form of an address to God, in answer, perhaps, to some question that they had propos'd to him about the duty of prayer: *Two things have I required of thee: Deny me them not, before I die. Remove far from me vanity and lies; give me neither poverty nor riches, feed me with food convenient for me, i. e. Allow me only to enjoy such a competency, as will enable me to live with decency, and advantage to my fellow creatures, in that station in which I am placed,) least I be full and deny thee, and say who is the Lord? or least I be poor and steal, and take the name of my God in vain.*

In this passage 'tis plainly intimated, that the *middle* state of life is, generally at least, more safe and eligible than either *want* or *superfluity*: With respect to its being better than *narrow* and *penurious* circumstances, there can be no dispute; but that it should be preferr'd to great *wealth* and *abundance*, will, I am persuaded, appear a very wild and extravagant paradox to the giddy and unthinking, who judge of things at first sight, without enquiring into their nature, or considering their consequences: For is it not a desirable thing, will such say, to be not only placed above poverty, and enjoy the necessaries and conveniences, but the *delights* also of human life?—to be persons of *figure*, *power*, and *influence*?—  
and



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and consequently, capable of serving our friends, and relieving the indigent and miserable, in a more *large* and *extensive* degree? — Can a condition, which may not only be so agreeable, but useful, be *mischievous* and *destructive* to mankind? It certainly may; nay, it actually has had this fatal consequence in many cases. And persons who have behaved with honour, and an unblemish'd reputation in *moderate* circumstances; nay, who have preserved their virtue, and manifested great presence and strength of mind, under the buffetings of *adverse* fortune; have been captivated and bewitched by the charms of an *affluent prosperity*, and the pleasures it brings along with it, and sunk into an indolent and dissolute life: Which shows us that there is not only *danger*, but *eminent* and *peculiar* danger in it, when it happens to some particular tempers; and in general, where there is not a lively *influence* of *religion* and *virtue*, and *firmness* and *resolution* of mind. But I proceed to consider the Words of the text more particularly, in the following method.

I. I shall endeavour to explain and illustrate what it says concerning the danger of a state of great *riches* and *superfluity* on the one hand, and of *want* and *poverty* on the other; from whence it will clearly appear, that the *middle* condition is in *general*, and, except to some *rare* and *peculiar* tempers, the most convenient and eligible. And

II. Make some remarks upon this doctrine to prevent *mistakes* that may arise from it, and direct to the right *use* and *improvement* of it.

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1<sup>st</sup>. I am to explain and illustrate what the text says concerning the danger of a state of great *riches* and *superfluity* on the one hand, and of *want* and *poverty* on the other. I shall take them just in the order in which it represents them to us. And

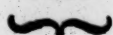
S E R M.  
VIII.

1<sup>st</sup>. For the danger that attends a state of great *riches* and *superfluity*, which is express'd thus, *least I be full and deny thee, and say who is the Lord?* To deny God signifies in scripture, sometimes, to act as if there was no righteous Governor and Judge of Mankind, to whom they are accountable, as well as directly to disown his being and providence: But I can't apprehend this to be the meaning of the phrase here, because, in this large view, there is no more danger of denying God to men in *high* and *flourishing* circumstances, than what *every other state* of life affords, which, has in it equal temptations to vice and immorality: I shall take it therefore in a stricter sense than this, and yet not in the most confined sense of all, and enquire briefly, what peculiar danger there is, arising from *riches* and *plenty*, of "irreligion and prophaneness, a disregard  
"and contempt of providence, and other crimes  
"of a like nature, that are committed more di-  
"rectly and immediately against God himself."

And, in general, the fundamental danger of all lies here, that in the height of prosperity, men are apt to be *careless* and *inconsiderate*. Chearfulness, and a relaxation from severer Studies and contemplations, is not only innocent but necessary, in the present mixed and imperfect state of human nature: But in an affluent prosperity, when  
every



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VIII.



every thing about us is gay, and has a smiling aspect, we are too apt to contract an habitual *levity* of mind, and neglect all *grave* and *serious* reflections. A continued succession of pomp and pleasure fixes our attention, and diverts it from greater and more important concerns. *Wise* men, indeed, who have impartially estimated the true worth of things, look upon riches and honours only as superfluities and outward decorations of life, and not as essential to human happiness; and value themselves upon them no farther, than as they enable them to do greater good to their fellow creatures; but the *foolish* and *unthinking* are made giddy by their prosperity: The natural consequence of which is, that they must be an easy prey to all the peculiar temptations of their wealthy and exalted state; and it will appear, particularly, from the following considerations, that they are in great danger of the vices implied in the text, For

1<sup>st</sup>. When the mind is thus weakened and dissolved, and its faculties enervated and broken, when the moderation of men's tempers is destroyed, and they are become thoughtless and inconsiderate, which the *indolence* and *gaiety*, and *various little trifling entertainments* of a prosperous condition have a natural tendency to effect; 'tis no wonder, if they pride themselves in their riches, as their ultimate happiness; and for want of reflecting on the instability of all human affairs, think themselves self sufficient; and lose that just sense which they ought to have of the sovereignty of their maker, and their absolute and necessary dependence upon him. 'Tis no wonder at all, if, by being *complimented* and *flattered*, their vanity

nity be raised so high, as to make them regardless of that supreme being, from whom all their abundance, honour, and greatness flows; nor if having conceived an extraordinary opinion of their own *merit* upon the account of their shining circumstances, they neglect to pay their due homage and worship to the Deity, and live unmindful of his benefits. This is, in effect, to deny not only God's *government of the world*, but his *absolute perfection*, and consequently his *being*: 'Tis to deny our *obligations* to him as the author of every thing we enjoy, and his *right* to our services. The language of such a conduct is, *who is the Lord that we should obey his voice?* And that all this dissingenuity and ingratitude towards the greatest and best of beings is a consequence, that, it may justly be feared, will spring from riches and greatness, when men are *immoderately fond* of them, and for want of due consideration, grown *presumptuous* and *arrogant*, experience abundantly testifies.

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For there are too many, to whom a time of affliction is a season of *some sort* of piety, because then their *sufferings* put them in mind of their *sins*, and the hope of deliverance makes them, *to appearance* at least, humble and submissive to their maker; but when things go on smoothly, and answer to the height of their wishes, they seem to think they have no farther *need* of him, and are sufficient for their own happiness, without his *interposition*. The distinguishing goodness of God, in their continued plenty and abundance, is unheeded, because it is *constant* and *uninterrupted*.—What a *perverse* creature is man! he wishes not to be *miserable*, and yet forgets the author of his happiness, because he has not allotted him some mixtures of *evil* and *misery* with it! —



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Or rather since this is not *human nature*, which abhors ingratitude, but a vile and melancholy *depravation* of it; what will not a man do when prosperity has made him *wanton* and *insolent*! But further,

2. 'Tis most evident, that affluent circumstances are attended with great temptations to *luxury*, and the immoderate pursuits of *pleasure*. *Plenty* too naturally begets *excess*: It has the *means* of it in its power, *custom* to countenance it, and generally *ministers of vice* enough at hand to prompt and excite to it. And luxury infeebls the mind, destroys every thing that is great and generous, and indisposes for all rational exercises and improvements. It naturally heightens and inflames the *sensual* passions, and leads to the pursuit of *irregular pleasures*. For what can that man have to restrain him from any enjoyment that his inclinations prompt him to, who has *wealth*, *power*, and *influence* to command them, and the opportunity, perhaps, of gratifying his corrupt appetites in a *private* manner, so as to avoid, in a great measure, that shame and infamy which justly attends it; what, I say, can reasonably be supposed to restrain such a one from indulging his corrupt desires, if he has no regard to *reason*, *conscience*, and the *authority* of his maker?

A sense of God, indeed, as the inspector and dreadful avenger of his wickedness, will create great uneasiness and confusion in his mind, and abate his relish of unlawful enjoyments. But can we think, that when he is immersed in sensual pleasures, and given up to vicious pursuits, he will suffer his imagination to be continually haunted and scared by such *ungrateful truths*, if it be  
in

in his power to prevent it? will he not endeavour to root out of his mind those *disagreeable Ideas*, which are a constant vexation and torment to him? So that by his vices, he is necessarily prejudic'd in favour of *Atheism*, and from wishing that there was no God, may come, by degrees, to imagine that there is none; or, at least, which will serve the turn of his vitious inclinations and pleasures full as well, that he does not exercise a particular providence over the *moral* world, nor take an account of their conduct. And as the pomp and splendour of his greatness continually *dazzles* his understanding, as the levity of his mind, and the gay amusements his riches furnish him with, scarce allow him any opportunity for *close* and *serious* thinking, and his high spirits bear him up against *sudden* and *occasional* reflections, he has, upon these accounts, *a better chance* than another man of being confirmed in his *atheistical* sentiments; and of hindering sober reasonings about the being and providence of God, and a judgment to come, from *fastening* upon him; which, if they were not some way or other diverted, must make the *stoutest* heart tremble in the midst of all its carnal delights: I say indeed *a better chance*, because to a man of such a depraved disposition, it appears under that character; but the real truth is, that his affluence and luxury only tend to blind and pervert his judgment the more, and, consequently to *harden* him in *Atheism* and *irreligion*. In the——

Third place, If at any time it happens to be the *fashion* to be *Atheistical*, and seem to have no sense of religion, the rich and great are, of all others, most likely to fall in with it. For 'tis, generally,



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their prevailing view to recommend themselves to the approbation of the *polite* world; and therefore we see daily, that, in compliance with the *reigning* taste, they run into dresses and customs that are neither *ornamental* nor *useful*, nor perhaps so *decent*, as one might expect from persons of a higher education. And, upon the same principle, if it should happen in the present age, as it probably did in *Agur's* time, that a disregard and contempt of the supreme Being, and bantering and ridiculing things sacred, are reckon'd *genteel* accomplishments; if religion should be looked upon as calculated only for the *populace*; and it should be thought the character of an *ill bred* man, and one that did not *know the world*, to be serious in public offices of devotion, or give the least suspicion of secret piety; if this, I say, should be the case, there is great danger that the persons above mentioned would fall in with the *modish* extravagance. They would, probably, think it unbecoming their rank and station in life to be out of the *fashion* even in a thing that is so contrary to *justice*, *honour*, *gratitude*, and the true *interest* of mankind: And their temptations to it might be the stronger, as their *pride* makes them condemn the ill opinion of the vulgar, and their circumstances place them above a state of *dependence*.

If it be said, that a disregard of the Deity, and discarding both natural, and revealed religion prevail very much in *middle* life, as well as amongst persons of a more *elevated* condition, I answer, that this will be found to be no prejudice to the present argument; because such, generally speaking, copy after the example of their *superiours*

ours, and are prophane, from a *servile imitation* of them, in order to be fashionable. And just in proportion as luxury, which is, *originally*, a vice of the great and wealthy, and can't be practis'd with *decency* by persons of inferior condition, who have not the same opportunities for it, and are not able to support it without losing their credit, and consuming their substance; just, I say, in proportion as *luxury* and the pursuit of *pleasure* has abounded, *irreligion*, likewise, has gain'd ground, and spread itself. Thus have I shown the temptations, arising from *superfluous wealth* and *greatness*, to deny God in the *strict* sense of the word, and act with disrespect and ingratitude towards his Providence.

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Suffer me now briefly to mention a few other vices of the most malignant and fatal consequence to mankind, to which it has *peculiar* temptations. And the

First is *pride* and *vanity*. When men are elated by their distinguish'd circumstances, they easily fancy themselves to be very *significant* persons, and possess'd of *extraordinary* merit: And this vain opinion, which is continually fed by their *mercenary dependents* and *flatterers* (among whom 'tis scarce possible for any man to preserve a just opinion of himself, and of human nature) discovers itself in every part of their conduct, and in all their appearances. Not but that it may be very innocent and rational for persons of *figure* and *substance* to allow themselves such diversions, and make such an appearance in public, as would be very improper and criminal in those who enjoy but *moderate fortunes*; nor would I be supposed to condemn that external shew and magnificence,



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which is a badge of *civil* honour, and necessary to distinguish the several ranks of men one from another, or maintain the respect due to their different characters. But for any to pride themselves, and fancy that there is a *proper merit* in dress and equipage, or in the prodigality and glittering pomp of greatness, is a vice that argues a very *low* and *degenerate* turn of mind; and whenever such a temper prevails, it will take men off from improving in those moral dispositions and habits, which alone constitute *true greatness*, and are the only *real excellency* of a reasonable being.

Farther, riches minister to *ambition*, which is one of the most irregular passions of human nature, and attended with the most mischievous effects: And in proportion to our *vanity*, and the *high views* we entertain for our selves, they have a tendency to beget in us an unbecoming and insolent *contempt* of others. For men are apt to think, that there is so much respect due to their superior circumstances, as if they were of a *different nature* from their fellow creatures, and originally formed in a *higher order* of being; and thus they sacrifice all the rights of mankind, resulting from their *natural equality*, to an *accidental* advantage, which has no merit at all in it otherwise than as 'tis enjoyed with condescension and benevolence, and a subserviency to the general good.

Finally, men are too easily tempted, by their riches and power, to be *imperious* and *tyrannical*, and to abuse those great talents, which God hath put into their hands for the good of others, to oppression and injustice; by which means they most wickedly pervert the wise scheme of providence, and are more *extensively* mischievous and hurtful,

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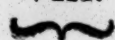
in proportion to their *greater capacity* for doing good. I now proceed

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2. To consider what the text says concerning the danger of a state of *want* and *poverty*; or *least I be poor and steal, and take the name of my God in vain*. The vices, to which strait and penurious circumstances of life are here represented as having peculiar temptations, are *theft*, and *taking the name of God in vain*, by which is most probably meant *perjury*. And 'tis very evident, that the temptation to these crimes is, in the nature of the thing, much stronger, when persons are embarrassed with difficulties, and oppressed by poverty, than it can be when they enjoy a superfluity of riches, or even a moderate fortune, which is sufficient to procure for them all necessaries, and proper conveniencies, and places them above care and anxiety. And as it appears likewise, in fact, that the guilty this way are most frequently necessitous people, who have either no employment to follow, or else had rather violate the most sacred obligations of conscience, than be forced to maintain themselves by honest labour; I shall say no more to this point directly, but enquire into the causes why the poor so easily give way to temptations of this kind. And,

1. 'Tis undoubtedly owing, in a great measure, to the want of a *good education*: The advantage of this is unspeakable; and nothing has a larger share in forming the difference there is between one man and another, tho' *originally* of the same species of beings: 'Tis this that distinguishes the *politer* parts of the world from the most *ignorant* and *barbarous* nation: For all mankind have the *faculty* of reason implanted in them by the great Creator; but



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if it be not *improved*, it will never shew itself to advantage: By good culture it may be raised to a state of great *maturity* and *perfection*; but if it be neglected, it will be over-run with *ignorance* and *prejudice*. Again, all men have a *natural power* to discern the difference between good and evil, and the solid grounds and foundations of morality; but, notwithstanding this, if they are not *taught* and *instructed*, their notions will be very imperfect, rude, and confused: Now there is this defect, generally, in the education of the *poorer sort* of people. — They are train'd up in a brutal stupidity. — No care is taken to instill into their minds proper notions of God, and of his providence, of a judgment to come, and the difference between virtue and vice. — And as they grow up thus *wild*, and without any *good* principles at least, if they are not corrupted by bad examples, and have not imbibed a contempt of all religion, 'tis no wonder that they are dissolute and extravagant in their practice: All which shews us the *great Use*, I might almost say, *absolute necessity* of a sober and virtuous education, and of infusing sentiments of wisdom and piety into children in their early years, and at the *first dawn* of reason: For their minds are then *tender* and *flexible*, free from *prejudice* and *unruly passion*, and equally susceptible of *good*, as *bad* impressions: And 'tis generally observed, that persons retain somewhat of the *tincture* that was given them in their education, all their lives after.

*Another reason* why poverty subjects men to the temptations intimated in the text is, that the poor are not trained up regularly to any *employment*, by which they may get an honest livelihood; and for

want

want of being inured to labour and industry, they contract a habit of idleness, than which nothing can be more detrimental to society; for it is, indeed, the *parent* of all vices: To this, particularly, it may be ascribed, that so many subsist by rapine and violence, and by abusing and plundering their fellow-creatures.

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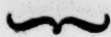
Again, persons in such low, mean circumstances are often destitute of a sense of *shame*, and regard to *reputation*, and, consequently, have lost one of the surest *guards* of their virtue and integrity, and are easily led into the most abominable and injurious vices: And this is not only owing to their having never received any notions of decency in their education, but to the *wrong custom* of the world. Poverty it self is look'd upon as an object of contempt; and for a poor man to pretend to have any reputation to lose, is too often matter of jest and ridicule: But this is certainly very *impolitic*, as well as unjust; because 'tis for the interest of society to encourage a *sense of honour* in every one that has a reasonable nature, whatever his outward circumstances may be. For it must be considered, that a regard to reputation, and a sense of shame frequently prevail, where the awful notions of a Deity, and a providence, and a future state, have little or no influence at all: And therefore, if these are destroy'd, as they generally are in the wretched poor, by one or other, or both the methods abovementioned, and they think they cannot render themselves more despicable by their *wickedness*, than they are already on account of their *poverty*; 'tis natural to suppose, that they may commit such crimes, as they would otherwise be *shocked* at the thought of.

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And in this insensibility and indifference about the good or ill opinion of the world, in this laziness and aversion to labour, in this brutish stupidity, and those corrupt and vitious sentiments, which they acquired from their education, they are confirmed by their *wicked associates*, persons, for the most part, of the same abandon'd principles with themselves : So that there is scarce a possibility of being reclaimed, but, on the other hand, 'tis highly probable they will be more and more encouraged and hardned in their Vices.

Let me just mention *another vice*, that comes under the character of *taking God's Name* in vain, which the poor are notoriously guilty of ; and that is the practice of *common swearing* : To this, I know of no *peculiar* temptation arising from their poverty : And it appears, in fact, that there is none ; because it is very near, if not altogether, as common among persons of high rank and circumstances, to the very great scandal of religion, and *their own dishonour*. For 'tis a shameful thing that they should indulge to so *vulgar* a vice ; a vice, to which there is not the least *temptation* ; and which is a *senseless, insignificant expletive* in discourse, that adds neither *strength*, nor *beauty*, to it. And if they will not refrain out of respect to the great God, who is infinitely their superiour and better, or from a dread of his vengeance ; they ought at least, out of *good manners*, to be ashamed to continue any longer such an *infamous* practice, to the offence of the soberest and wisest of their fellow-creatures, and in defiance of the laws of their country. I proceed now to the

SECOND thing propos'd, *viz.* to suggest a few useful reflections on what has been advanced in the

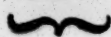
the foregoing discourse, in order to prevent mistakes that may arise from it, and direct to the right use and improvement of it. And,

The 1<sup>st</sup> observation I would make is, that notwithstanding what has been said, both *riches* and *poverty* are capable of being improved to the most useful purposes: For in affluent circumstances, let a man but govern his appetites, and enjoy his fortune with discretion, and he has the utmost advantages for cultivating his mind; — a freedom from the *cares* of life, and consequently an *easiness* and *cheerfulness* of temper, than which nothing is more serviceable to us in the pursuit of knowledge; — leisure for study; — opportunities for consulting the best books, and conversing with the most learned men in all professions, &c. And, besides, which is much more desirable, he has it in his power to exercise *diffusive* and *Godlike benevolence*; — to be the Patron of virtue, to encourage it by his example, and support it by his authority and influence, and to be the kind instrument of providence in relieving and comforting his fellow-creatures; and for behaving well in so *critical* a station, and doing so much good to human society, will be entitled to a greater reward. And even a state of *poverty*, if it be born with becoming patience and submission to the will of God, may be of great use, as it inures us to *laborious* and *self-denying* virtue, to strength and firmness of resolution; and consequently prepares for various services of great importance to mankind, which can't be expected from any whose minds are *relax'd* and *enfeebled* by a long course of indolence and luxury, — who are *unexperient'd* in difficulties, and therefore *frighted* at the prospect of them.

2. As

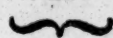


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2. As poverty is attended with such disadvantages with respect to the practice of virtue, we should be excited by this consideration to *commiserate* the case of the poor, and relieve them according to our abilities, that we may remove, at least in some degree, the *temptations* they are under to vice and immorality. But

3. The chief use of all, is to moderate our passion for riches and greatness: Such a station is much more dangerous, when persons are raised to it from a *low* condition, or *moderate* fortune, than to those who have been *bred up* in it: The suddenness of the change, in one case, *shocks* men's tempers, and *oversets* their reason; whereas, in the other, they having been always accustom'd to it, the *impressions* it makes are not so strong and *sensible*. Besides the desire of superfluity is not a *natural* desire; — all can't have it indulg'd, and therefore ought not to be set upon it: They should rather consider what 'tis proper for persons in *their circumstances* to expect, and be contented with that; and not aspire impatiently and eagerly after every thing, that the irregular cravings of an *insatiate* appetite may prompt them to. And from what has been said so largely in this discourse concerning the danger that attends worldly prosperity, we may see abundant reason not to *envy* those who are possess'd of it. For what is it we envy? — why, perhaps *ignorance*, *vice*, and *misery*, under a glittering and pompous appearance — The envied circumstances, which are so highly the object of our admiration and desire, may have corrupted the *virtue* of those whom we think happy in the enjoyment of them, and, in consequence, have destroyed their *peace*; so that they



they may languish amidst all their plenty, and be distracted with innumerable cares; or else may be gay and thoughtless, or given up to riot and luxury. The generality of mankind are such wild and inconsiderate creatures, and examine so little into the nature of things, that *a fine outside* easily deceives them; so that they *love*, and *admire*, and consequently *envy*, they know not what: Whereas, if they would weigh matters impartially, their reason must inform them, that, to some tempers, the *ease*, *laziness*, and *affluence* of prosperity will administer numberless temptations to vice and extravagance; and that, on the contrary, afflictions may be of great use, when persons can't be brought to *consideration*, or kept in tolerable *order*, any other way: And in such cases they would be led to think very differently from what they usually do, *i. e.* to look upon the *seeming evil* as *real good*, and on *prosperity* as a *real evil*, notwithstanding its flattering and deceitful appearances. Besides, did they compare their own *intire* case with that of the persons whom they are so apt to envy, they would often find the advantage to be on their own side. For the outward gaiety and splendor of prosperity, if it has corrupted the hearts and manners of its possessors, is a great misfortune, in comparison of *moderate*, nay even of *afflicted* circumstances of life, joined with a grave and considerate mind, regular passions, and a virtuous conduct: Add to this, that prosperity, to those especially who envy it in others, is likely to be attended with the most mischievous and destructive consequences. For what is the true object of their envy? Is it the *capacity* those persons enjoy of doing

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VIII. the *abundance, honour, pomp, and luxury*, of such  
a station: And if they are enamour'd of these  
things, there is no ground to hope that they will  
guard against any *fashionable* excesses, or abridge  
themselves even of the most *unmanly* entertain-  
ments of a vain and luxurious age.



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## S E R M O N IX.

The mischiefs of slavish complaisance, and cowardice.

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PROV. xxix. 25. former part.

*The fear of man bringeth a snare. —*

**T**IS wisely ordered by the Author of S E R M. IX.  
our being, that *every passion* of the soul  
may not only be of great use to us,  
if its natural design and tendency be regularly  
pursued, but is capable also, by being perverted,  
of causing much vexation and misery to ourselves,  
and injury to our fellow creatures: For this is a  
demonstration, founded in nature, and obvious  
to the meanest capacity of the necessity of *self-*  
*government*, and that we would take the utmost  
care to keep all our affections and appetites within  
those bounds, which the Creator hath prescribed.  
Thus, for instance, the *desire* of happiness, and  
*aversion* to pain and misery, which works so  
strongly in all mankind, is evidently, in itself of  
the highest advantage; but if we form wrong no-  
tions of the happiness which we ought ultimately  
to pursue, and the evils we should chiefly avoid,  
it



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it will as certainly prove fatal to us. Again, the passion of *shame*, is an excellent preservative from base and dishonourable actions, and nothing is a stronger guard and security to our virtue and innocence than this, when regularly exercised, and employ'd about proper objects; but a *false shame*, which is influenced more by the opinions and customs of men, than by the eternal differences of things, a *false shame* that breaks our spirits, and makes such tame cowards of us, that we have not resolution enough to stand up for the honour of God, and the immutable obligations of virtue; nor, consequently, to assert and maintain the dignity of our reasonable nature; this, I say, necessarily destroys every thing that is praise-worthy and generous in us, and must betray us into innumerable errors in practice, which are not merely inconsistent with *integrity*, but will render us, to the last degree, *vile* and *contemptible*.

And the same may be said of *fear*: While it proceeds upon right principles, and is proportioned to the weight and moment of the evils about which it is conversant, it must be calculated to serve the most beneficial purposes, as it warns us where our greatest danger lyes, and strongly prompts us to avoid it: But the case is quite otherwise when it forms *imaginary* dangers, and alarms with *false* terrors;—when *fancy* or *corrupt passion*, and not the reason of things is the foundation and root of it;—when we fear *natural* evils, which, under the direction of an all-wise providence, may be over-ruled for good, more than *moral*, which tend necessarily and invariably to the misery and ruin of the rational creation; and the censures and frowns of men, whose wisdom, power, and duration

ration is *confined* and *limited*, more than the dis-  
 pleasure and vengeance of the Almighty and eter-  
 nal God ; for then our fears will infallibly turn us  
 aside from our duty, and be attended with most  
 pernicious consequences, as for the sake of avoid-  
 ing lesser and comparatively trifling evils, we shall  
 run ourselves upon others that are infinitely more  
 dreadful: Which shows us the vast importance of  
 looking well to our *principles* of action, and in-  
 deed of making this our first and chief care; be-  
 cause if the prevailing *principles* of our minds are  
 corrupt and vicious, 'tis, in the nature of things,  
 impossible, that our *practice* should be virtuous  
 and regular. Evil principles of action, as long  
 as they are entertained and indulged, as necessa-  
 rily produce a wicked life, as any other causes do  
 their *natural* and *immediate effects*; and therefore  
 till they are corrected and altered, 'tis in vain to  
 expect any reformation in the outward conduct.  
 This is the ground of *Solomon's* observation in  
 the text, which I now proceed to consider more  
 particularly, in the following method.

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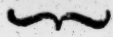
- I. I shall show what we must understand by  
*the fear of man.*
- II. In what sense it *bringeth a snare.* And,
- III. Offer some remedies against it.

I. I am to explain what we must understand  
 by *the fear of man.* *The fear of man* I take in its  
 largest sense, not only as implying the fear of those  
 positive evils and punishments, which the power  
 and vengeance of man can inflict, but a reverence  
 of human authority, and customs, and a dread  
 of the censures, and reproaches of our fellow crea-  
 K tures.



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tures. But that I may talk distinctly, and without confusion, upon this subject, it may be proper briefly to show, that this phrase, when it is used, as in the text, in a *criminal sense*, must be understood with some *caution*, and *limitation*. For,

1<sup>st</sup>. There is, undoubtedly, a *reverence* due to *human authority* in all points that do not exceed the just bounds of it: and the paying this regard is absolutely necessary to hold the frame of civil societies together, and prevent lawless riot and confusion. In like manner there is a *deference* due to the *innocent customs* and *usages* of the world; and singularity in such instances, in opposition to the unanimous opinion of our fellow creatures, can be the effect of nothing but *weakness*, or *obstinacy*: Such a conduct is as *ridiculous*, as the complying, in things morally evil, would be *wicked*: 'Tis also utterly inconsistent with a *social spirit*, or with that temper of mind which is absolutely necessary to answer the great end, for which men agreed, at first, to enter into society. For the ends of society cannot be secured but by mutual condescension and respect, and the compliance and submission of the *minor* part, in things lawful, and which are entirely of a *civil* nature, to the judgment and practice of the *majority*; and 'tis impossible but peace and good order must be destroyed, if all the members of it are *stiff* and *untractable*.

Again, as 'tis natural for every one who loves himself to desire the favour and good opinion of his fellow creatures, and his duty to cultivate and improve it by all *just* and *honourable* methods, because the quiet and convenience of his life, and his usefulness too, depends, in a great measure, on his reputation and character in the world; he can-

not

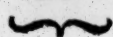
not help being *afraid* of censure and reproach, and ought to be solicitous to avoid (if possible) its being fixed upon him, or to deliver and clear himself from it. Provided he stoops to nothing that is contrary to the principles of true honour, and virtue, such a concern is highly just, and reasonable, and what no *wise* man can be without. And, on the contrary, men must be of a temper quite stupid, and destitute of common reflection, if they have no fear at all of *public reproach* and *infamy*, and must lose, besides, what is in the nature of things (and therefore what must appear to be designed as such by the great author of nature) a very powerful restraint from *mean, ungenerous, and disgraceful practices*.

3d. The principle of *self-preservation* necessarily excites in us a fear of those evils, which we have reason to apprehend from the power or malice of any of our fellow creatures, and directs to the use of all proper means for our own defence and security. We are so far from being oblig'd to have no care, or solicitude on this head, that we shall be guilty of the utmost rashness and folly, if we expose ourselves to their resentment unnecessarily, and run upon any sufferings, which with honour and a good conscience, may be avoided. All *innocent*, not excepting the most artful, compliances and evasions must be used, to screen ourselves from evils of this kind; otherwise, instead of being martyrs in a good cause, we only suffer the natural effects of our own wilfulness and obstinacy. And finally, a *dread* of those punishments which the civil magistrate, inflicts, for the preservation of mens natural rights, and the security of their persons and properties from unjust violence,



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violence, and to deter from the commission of such vices as are inconsistent with the publick peace and welfare; this, I say, is not only lawful, because natural inconveniences and evils of all kinds cannot but be the object of our fear and aversion, but necessary; both as the end of these punishments cannot be answered, nor, consequently, civil societies subsist, unless we are struck with terror at the apprehension of them, and because they, are, in themselves, fit and reasonable, and no more than what the crimes, for which they are executed, strictly deserve. A man indeed, that suffers, by *unjust* human laws, for what is really praise-worthy, may support himself with this reflection, that he suffers for the cause of *truth* and *virtue*, and, being conscious of his *integrity*, defy the power and cruelty of his persecutors; but he that can bear to think, without horror, of being *deservedly* branded with public infamy, and cut off as an enemy to society, and the good of mankind, must have extinguish'd his *reason*, and lost all remains of *honour* and *ingenuity*.

Thus far then the fear of man may be defended and justified. In some of the instances which have been mentioned, it is, at least, *lawful*, because founded on principles that human nature cannot throw off; and in others *virtuous*, and *commendable*: But it becomes criminal, when 'tis the *ruling* and *predominant* principle in our minds, because then it either supposes, that we look upon the approbation and favour of men as our supreme good, and upon the frowns, reproaches, and terrors of the world as the greatest evil that can befall us; or, at least (as 'tis always the nature of that which is the prevailing principle, to *over-rule* and

and *controul* all other principles) it will be too hard for the fear of God, to bear down our natural sense of good and evil, and destroy that presence of mind, that constancy and resolution, which is necessary to enable us to behave with honour to our nature, and suitably to those relations in which the all-wise creator hath placed us, and to overcome the difficulties of a virtuous course. And from this short account of the sinful *fear of man* which the text speaks of, it will easily appear in the

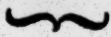
2d. Place, in what sense it *bringeth a snare*, which I proceed therefore to consider. And not to insist on many little mean compliances, and *smaller* inconveniences, to which it exposes men; it throws temptations in their way which are likely to prevail so far, as to destroy all improvements in true wisdom and virtue. For,

1st. Let us suppose a man, under the influence of this *slavish* principle engaged in searches after truth; — what proficiency is it possible for him to make? If he has an extravagant veneration for *human authority*, nothing must be receiv'd but what has *that stamp* upon it. — If he aims at being *popular*, and dreads ill will and censure, no truths can be admitted but such as are *fashionable*, and have the current character and reputation of *orthodoxy*. The odious names of *Infidel* and *Heretic* will frighten him from proceeding in his enquiries, and calling in question the *common standard*. — Or if he is awed by the *vengeance* of *civil* power, and the *terrors* of this world, this must raise an unconquerable aversion in his mind against all truths, that may expose him to *danger*, and *suffering*.



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In order to the making improvements in divine knowledge, 'tis absolutely necessary that the mind be *free, calm, and unruffled*, under no *restraint, or terror*; otherwise it will be *reserv'd and partial*: There must be no *corrupt passion* to darken the understanding, nor *private interest* to mislead and pervert it. But the man we are speaking of is held in strong fetters; his fears *distract and confound* him; he sees difficulties and discouragements on every side, and but one safe path to walk in, even the *old beaten track* chalk'd out by authority, which is the only way to that esteem, applause, and favour, which he so ardently pursues, and to avoid that disgrace, and those sufferings, which are of all things, most terrible to his imagination. — And being thus *enslav'd*, is it to be expected that he should exercise impartiality and freedom of thought? — Where the light is so *offensive*, is it not highly probable that the eyes of the mind will be shut against it? — 'Tis *difficult* even for men who are influenc'd by more rational and noble principles, and have a virtuous turn of mind, to maintain an unbiass'd and steady pursuit of truth, when the world *frowns* upon it, and loads it with *reproaches and persecutions*; but to him, who is ready to sacrifice every thing to his reputation and worldly interest, it must be absolutely *impossible*. Let us suppose, however, that, notwithstanding his fears, he may be *impartial* in his searches after truth; the case will be very much the same, with respect to the good resulting from it, as if they entirely *suppress'd* his inquiries. For,

2dly, This principle will infallibly prevail with him, in times of difficulty and danger, either to  
*conceal,*

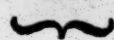
*conceal*, or *deny* it. 'Tis as great an absurdity to expect, that one who is dispirited by worldly fears should be a *confessor* and *martyr* for true religion, as that a *coward* should be brave and valiant. The *fearful* and *unbelieving*, or, at least, the rejecters of true religion, when it is oppress'd and persecuted, are therefore justly join'd together in scripture, because they are, in the nature of things, inseparable: For the prevailing concern of such persons is to avoid that which is the object of their fears, and, consequently, every thing else must give way to it. So that the direct consequence of this destructive principle is insincerity, and the making *shipwreck of faith, and a good conscience*; and if it had sway'd in Christ and his apostles, and the primitive disciples, Christianity could never have been propagated in the world; and should it universally prevail in future ages, mankind must for ever remain in their ignorance and errors, without a possibility of a reformation.

But this is not the worst effect of it; for it leads men even to *revile* and *banter* the truth — Whence, else, do many of the *profane scoffs*, that are thrown out against religion, proceed, but from this source? — The persons who make use of 'em cannot, generally, be suspected of bantering Christianity, upon being convinc'd that 'tis in itself ridiculous, because they never examin'd it, or consider'd the pretensions on which its authority is founded. — They want either *capacity*, or *inclination*, or *both*, for such an enquiry. — The thing is attended with *difficulty*, and requires somewhat of *thought*, which they are strangers and enemies to, and cannot bear the *fatigue* of. But to be a *wit*, and to be *fashionable* in the companies they frequent, is a



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much easier thing. 'Tis but getting the laugh against revelation, by throwing out a *dull common-place-jest* against it, and the business is done. Tho', as an ingenious author \* observes, a very little *sense*, with a good deal of *vice* and *ill nature*, will qualify a man for this kind of satire. I shall conclude what I have to say concerning these *untbinking little critics* with this single remark; that how much soever they may magnify their own abilities, and be puffed up for being thought persons of refin'd reason, and uncommon penetration, by such as are no wiser than themselves, they really act a very foolish part, in abusing and ridiculing things sacred, only because they do not *understand* them, and, for the sake of a light wanton piece of drollery, hazarding the salvation of their immortal souls.

But to proceed. The slavish *fear of man* will have the same malignant influence upon our morals, as it has been shewn to have, in its direct tendency, upon our *faith*: For when it is risen to such a height, as to over-rule the dictates of natural conscience, and entirely to destroy the strength and constancy of our minds, we are an easy prey to every temptation, and lie open to the most desperate and abandon'd wickedness: Its tendency to an immoral practice appears, in part, from what has been already said, wherein it has been shewn, that in difficult and discouraging times, it leads men to conceal, or deny, the truth, and, consequently, to *disimulation* and *hypocrisy*; but this, being a matter of great importance, deserves to be more particularly and fully illustrated.

\* Archbishop Tillotson.

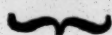
Let us suppose, then, a person of this character to live in very corrupt times, when virtue is *unpopular*, and labours under disgrace, and vice is prevailing and *fashionable*: He dreads the reproaches of the *multitude*, and yet these he is sure to meet with if he pursues a virtuous course of life; what then can be expected but that he will give himself up to all the extravagancies of the age, and fall in with the *common* degeneracy? The charge of *singularity*, and the *odium* that attends it, will be more than sufficient to counter-balance his weak inclinations towards virtue, and to make him as heartily and universally vitious as the rest of his neighbours; tho' it be, really, our glory to be *singular* in asserting the honour of our maker, and vindicating the law of our reasonable nature, which is of the most sacred and indispensable obligation, and a cause of the highest importance; and the utmost pitch of madness to debase our excellent faculties, and make ourselves miserable, only because others are so *frantic* as to do the like, and to avoid the imputation of *obstinate* and *unmannerly preciseness*.

Again, if it be a man's favourite scheme to acquit himself to the *polite* world, and he dreads their contempt as the greatest of all misfortunes; what is the natural consequence? Why, that if these pretenders to politeness are dissolv'd in *effeminacy*, and make *luxury* and *riot* the characteristic of a fine gentleman, he must immediately resign himself up to the gratification of his appetites, and to all the *modish* vices. And, accordingly, tho' it be indeed shocking and monstrous, and greatly to the disgrace of the present age, there are too many, who, from a *false modesty*, and be-  
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cause they will not be so *rude* as to contradict the general humour of their company, are guilty of extravagancies which they have a secret abhorrence of; and some, 'tis to be fear'd, who to raise their character for debauchery, and, consequently, for an *elegant taste*, boast of vices that they never committed. — Alas, where is the *reason* of mankind, where their becoming sense of the *dignity* of human nature, when they can glory in what is the reproach and shame of it; and endeavour to support the reputation, not merely of being *men*, but the most *refin'd* part of the species, on such actions, as sink 'em below the rank of *brute* creatures! For, in truth, as such persons will not think for themselves, they ought to be told, that vice and wickedness of all kinds is the greatest *abuse* and *violence* that can be offer'd to their rational faculties; — that there cannot be a fine gentleman without *good sense* and a *just discernment* of things, at least, not without *true honour*, which is inseparable from virtue; — that blaspheming the establish'd religion of their country, and those things which all considerate and sober men highly value and reverence, is a very *mean* accomplishment, and what not only a serious *Deist*, but even a downright *Atheist*, who has any knowledge of the world, and any notion of *right* behaviour, may be asham'd of; — and that a *singular awkward dress*, an *impertinent trifling gaiety*, and a *thoughtless unmeaning* conduct, will not atone for a violation of those essential rules of civility and decency. Let me add, that all the vices, into which the evil principle mention'd in the text betrays those who are govern'd by it, argue the utmost baseness of spirit, and consequently both they, and the principle from whence they proceed,

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are as inconsistent with the character of a *hero*, and a man of *true honour*, as they are with that of a *good Christian*.

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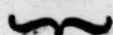
To conclude this head, if it be our ultimate view to secure the countenance and favour of persons in *authority*, and avoid their displeasure, this likewise will subject us to many snares and inconveniences. The laws indeed of all well regulated societies are favourable to virtue, and pointed at vice and immorality: But notwithstanding this, the state of things may be, and oftentimes is so corrupt, that vicious compliances are necessary to obtain the good will of our superiors; and when this is the case, the man who is determined, at all adventures, to secure their approbation, and avoid their frowns, must be easily captivated and seduc'd: He must, and probably will, be a companion with them in luxury and prodigality, lie and dissemble, flatter their vanity, and be the instrument of their ambition, covetousness, and unlawful pleasures. So that, in every view of it, the slavish *fear of man* has an evident tendency to corrupt our integrity, and leads to the most hurtful and destructive vices.

But it may be said, there is still this advantage, that when authority, power, and interest are on the side of true religion and virtue, this principle will as effectually excite to a love and reverence of *these*, as it will, in contrary circumstances, to *immorality* and *wickedness*. It must be own'd it will to outward appearance. But this desirable state of things is likely to happen but seldom, the generality of the world being too frequently in the wrong, with respect both to their *opinions* and *practices*; or if it should happen, men would entirely,



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tirely lose the *merit* of their affected concern and zeal for virtue and piety, because of motives from which it flows. For nothing can render either our enquiries after truth, or the performance of religious duties properly laudable, but their being the matter of our *free choice*, and our acting from such dispositions, as have a tendency to the same conduct in *all* circumstances. And that virtue, on the contrary, can be worth but little, which in times of prosperity, and when it is countenanc'd and upheld by the influence of authority, and by public favour, only *seems* to flourish, and does not spring from its *genuine* principles; but fades and languishes, and entirely disappears, as soon as 'tis brought to a *trial*. Having thus consider'd the snares and temptations, fatal to religion and sincerity, which attend *the fear of man*, when it is a predominant and governing passion. I proceed,

In the third and last place, to offer some remedies against it. And,

1<sup>st</sup>. Let us maintain and improve in our minds a strong sense of the necessary difference between good and evil. For if we are firmly convinc'd, that there is a fixed and eternal law for the conduct of all rational beings in the nature of things, which cannot be alter'd by *custom* and *opinion*, nor by any *authority* whatsoever, no not by that of God himself, we shall not be easily persuaded to violate the rules of our duty, upon any considerations. Men who think *loosely* may be apt to imagine, that the obligations of virtue are not so strict and indispensable; and perhaps, that God will excuse a deviation from 'em, when they are *forced* to it by reproaches and persecutions: But had they enquired into the true grounds of morality, they would

would have found that its obligation is immutable, and consequently, that where there is a wilful departure from it, nothing can possibly recommend us to the divine favour. And thus a more steddy regard to religion would prevail, and *the fear of man* proportionably decrease. To this remedy against it, let us add,

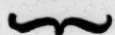
2dly, A becoming sense of the *dignity* of our nature. This can only be supported by an inflexible adherence to the rules of virtue and true goodness; but, by improving in these, we are capable of advancing to a *God-like* perfection. And shall we dishonour and obscure our rational powers, by enslaving 'em to vice and wickedness? This thought, made habitual to our minds, would sustain our resolution against all the terrors of the world; this thought, I say, that we have the honour to be formed after the *image* of God, and that as long as we maintain our moral rectitude, we continue to *resemble* him; and, especially, that by being steadfast in our duty, in spite of all oppositions and discouragements, we imitate the greatest and most exalted part of his character, his *constant and invariable* goodness.

3dly, Against the vice pointed at in the text, the wise man advises as a remedy, in the latter part of the verse, *trust in God: the fear of man bringeth a snare, but whoso putteth his trust in the Lord, shall be safe.* For if we firmly believe the wisdom and goodness of his over-ruling providence, that he orders all things for the best, and with a design to promote the general happiness; and that all the evils we suffer for righteousness sake will be abundantly compensated, and turn, in the end, to our unspeakable advantage; this ought



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Psal. xxvii

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Psal. cxviii.

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ought in reason, to moderate our fears, compose the hurry and disorder of our minds, and reconcile us to all events. And accordingly, we find this serene and pious disposition in the holy *Psalmist*, who expresses himself thus, with an air of security and triumph : *The Lord is my light, and my salvation, whom shall I fear ? The Lord is the strength of my life, of whom shall I be afraid ?* and again, *the Lord is on my side, I will not fear what man can do unto me.*

Finally, as the most *effectual* remedy against the fear of man, let us cultivate a supreme reverence of God, These two are absolutely inconsistent, and cannot subsist together : For as the fear of man destroys our due regard to the divine Majesty, the true fear of God will *limit*, and reduce within *reasonable* bounds, the dread of our fellow-creatures. Let us, therefore, by frequent mediation, fix in our minds a lively idea of his absolute perfection. Let us contemplate his spotless holiness, strict impartial justice, infinite power, and boundless wisdom, in order to excite the highest possible awe and veneration of him. Let us seriously consider that he is the author of our being, and of every thing we enjoy, that we are necessarily dependent upon him, that our happiness and misery are entirely in his power, who has universal nature at his command, and is the sovereign uncontrollable disposer of all events ; and consequently, that his favour is our *life*, and his displeasure the most dreadful of all evils. And if we are afraid of the reproaches of ignorant, prejudiced and sinful men, how much more strongly should we be concerned to prevent his having an ill opinion of us, who

is the greatest and best of beings, and whose judgment is always according to truth, certain and infallible? To conclude, the wisdom of God is capable of contriving, and his power of executing vengeance infinitely more terrible on impenitent sinners, than any thing they can undergo in the present state; and whereas the scene of all the tyranny and oppression which we can suffer from our fellow-creatures, is confined within the narrow compass of this mortal and uncertain existence, he has *an unchangable and endless life*, and consequently, can not only punish in what *degree*, but to what *length of duration* he pleases. Our saviour's advice, therefore, is certainly very just and reasonable; *not to fear them who kill the body*, Mat.x.28. *but are not able to kill the soul; but rather to fear him*, who after having made perverse and irreclaimable offenders miserable, in such a measure, and for so long a period, as the wise ends of his government require, can absolutely *destroy both soul and body in hell*.





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## S E R M O N X.

Rules for the profitable reading the  
Holy Scriptures.

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JOHN v. 39.

*Search the scriptures.*—

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**A**S mankind are endued with moral powers, and consequently accountable creatures, it necessarily follows, that they had always a law or rule of action *sufficient* to direct their conduct. The *original and universal* law was what we call the law, or religion of nature, This their *reason* was capable of discovering; and it would have taught them, if they had consulted, and carefully attended to it, the being and perfections of God, his providential government of the world, the duties they owed to him, and one another, and which related to the right government of their affections and appetites; and, in short, how to behave in the various circumstances and relations of human life. In like manner, it would have furnished proper motives to a regular and virtuous conduct, — from the excellency of virtue in itself; — its necessary tendency

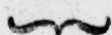
dency to the perfection and happiness of human nature, and the good of society ;——and by giving a well grounded hope, in some way or other worthy his infinite wisdom, and concern for the rectitude and order of the moral world, of the special protection and favour of their Creator, and supreme Governour.

But notwithstanding this wise provision, by the natural light planted in every man's mind, the world became, in fact, *grossly* and almost *universally* depraved ; ran into deplorable ignorance of God ; into childish and very dishonourable conceptions of his nature and attributes ; into idolatry ; and an absurd, hurtful, and endless superstition ; and their R E L I G I O N corrupted their morals. 'Twas not because their reason was, *in itself*, insufficient to direct to better sentiments of things, but because it was not *improved* and *cultivated*. However, as mankind was really thus corrupted, and had lost, in a great measure, the knowledge of the true religion of nature, the expediency and usefulness of a revelation was not at all the less, merely because reason, if rightly exercised, was capable of discovering all the necessary principles of morality ; nay, indeed, the advantage of it is altogether as evident, as it would have been, if men were *unavoidably* ignorant of the great truths of religion. For how they came to be out of the way is not the question, whether it proceeded from a defect in their natural powers, or from want of attention, and not using these powers as they ought ; in both cases, 'tis certain, they *needed* to be set right again, and recovered to a just sense of their duty, and happiness : And accordingly God was pleased



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ed graciously to interpose, and give a revelation suited to the *circumstances* and *necessities* of an ignorant and degenerate world: But tho' this revelation was an unspeakable privilege *at first*, by putting a stop to superstition and wickedness, and diffusing light and knowledge amongst men; tho' it may *still* be of the utmost use, to the bulk of mankind, as a *standing rule*, by supplying them constantly with proper thoughts, which is what the common people, in all ages, have most wanted, and prescribing a plain, intelligible, and compleat rule of morals; notwithstanding, I say, that a revelation is so desirable a blessing, and may answer such valuable purposes, 'tis certain that men may pervert it, as well as extinguish their reason; and that if it be neglected, and not examined into with care and impartiality, it will be, just as that natural light was, and is at present, in the more ignorant and superstitious parts of the world, *dark* and *useless*: Of which the monstrous corruptions of christianity in *Popish* countries, equal to any corruptions of natural religion in the most barbarous *Heathen* nations, are a notorious and unanswerable proof.

'Tis indeed a principle of their faith, that the common people are not to examine into their religion; but take it *implicitly* from the church: And it must be allowed, that this is a necessary principle to establish *anticristian tyranny* over the consciences of men, and support schemes of doctrine which bid defiance to reason, and are inconsistent with the whole design and tenour of revelation: These things will not bear the light, nor stand a free and impartial trial, and therefore are sheltered under the covert of ignorance and darkness.

ness. But can any thing be more absurd than such a conduct as this? Does it not derogate, in the highest degree, from the excellency and perfection of the scriptures? is it not a very unworthy and injurious reflection on the wisdom and goodness of God? nay does it not entirely destroy all the ends and uses of the Christian revelation?

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'Twill be needless to enter into a large proof of these things in any nation where *light* and *liberty* prevails, and persons have a just notion of their rights, either as *men*, or as *Christians*. For if God gives any revelation at all, the common sense of mankind determines, that it must, in all essential and important branches of it, be a plain and easy rule; obvious to the capacities of all for whose benefit it is designed. For what is the end of a revelation? Is it not to instruct the ignorant, and consequently to lay down plain principles for directing and regulating their behaviour? Or is it to amuse and confound their minds yet more with *deep subtilties*, with *perplexed* and *intricate* speculations? A revelation that is not intelligible is as much a contradiction, as to say darkness is light. And there is an unanswerable force in the common argument used upon this occasion, *viz.* either that God *could not* reveal himself clearly in those points which are of the greatest consequence to mankind, or that he *would not*: The former of these reflects upon his *wisdom*, the latter on his *goodness*; so that either way, the supposition is unworthy of God, and dishonourable to his perfections; since it represents him as a very *weak*, or else as a *capricious ill-natur'd* being, who intended not to assist, but bewilder his creatures, and lead them into a maze of uncertainty and confusion.

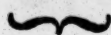
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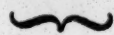
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Again, a revelation that is dangerous to be read, and can't be trusted to the reason and judgment of mankind, that needs to be *illustrated, corrected, or supplied* by a *living infallible oracle*, and *judge of controversies*, is altogether as insignificant as no revelation at all. If men have a *standing rule* to have recourse to, 'tis, at least, possible, that if they seriously consider and search into it, they may frame just notions of things, a rational scheme to act upon: But if they are *blindly* to follow their spiritual guides, and swallow all their doctrines *implicitly*, they are liable to endless impostures; and can have no guard against the most *stupid enthusiasm*, nor even against *irreligion* itself.

Finally, a revelation designed for *general* use, which is evidently the case of the Christian, must be chiefly calculated for the bulk of mankind, and adapted to their capacities. The *ingenious* and *thinking* part have, in every age, been a very few; and the generality, persons of *little reflection*, who must be instructed in the most easy and familiar manner, and taught their duty with the greatest plainness and simplicity. To assert therefore that the scriptures are obscure, and unintelligible, full of mystery and darkness, renders them quite useless as an *universal* rule; and consequently defeats the very end of their being written, which was *general* instruction: and to deny the reading of them to the *common people* is to deny it to those, for whose benefit they were more directly and immediately intended. This is the manifest reason of the thing.

Agreably hereto, we find the scripture itself is so far from *debarring* the people of this right, that it *insists* upon it, and *encourages* it in the strongest terms.



terms. There are no distinctions of persons, some to *lead*, and others *absolutely to submit* to their interpretations and decisions; but the exhortations and instructions are *general*. They were not the *Scribes* and *Pharisees*, and *Doctors* of the law, but the *common sort* of Jews to whom our Saviour said in the text, *search the scriptures*; nay, whom he supposes not only capable of understanding the *plain* doctrines and laws of the Old Testament, but the more *obscure* and *intricate* parts of it, the prophecies relating to the Messiah; *search the scriptures, they are they that testify of me*: And for this the people of *Berea* are greatly commended, *viz.* for not believing the Apostles themselves implicitly, but *searching the scriptures daily, whether these things* Acts xvii. *were so*. This practice of theirs is represented as <sup>11</sup>. the mark of a *noble* and *ingenuous* mind; whereas the contrary springs from abject and slavish prejudice. In like manner St. Paul speaks of *Timothy*, and describes it as what had been of great advantage to him, *that from a child he had known the* 2 Tim. i. *holy scriptures*. And of those same scriptures he <sup>15</sup>. says, that they were *able to make him wise unto sal-* Ibid. *vation*; and again, *all scripture is profitable for* Ver. 16, *doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction* <sup>17</sup>. *in righteousness, that the man of God may be perfect, thoroughly furnished unto all good works*. Now if it was the duty of *all* to search into the *Jewish* scriptures, and even into dark prophecies, the common people must certainly be proper judges of, and consequently obliged to examine into, the plain facts, doctrines, and moral precepts of Christianity. Nay, it can't be reconciled to the wisdom of God, to suppose, that the *last* and most *perfect* revelation of his will is not also the *clearest* and



S E R M. *fullest*; or that the same characters of being profitable for doctrine, reproof, correction, and instruction in righteousness, which render it fit to be perused and studied by all, do not belong to that in a much higher degree, than they did to a preparatory revelation of inferior consequence, and more limited extent.

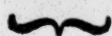
And as the right of all the people to search the scriptures is evident, founded in reason, and strongly asserted in the revelation itself; so are the advantages of it. — Reading the scriptures with seriousness and diligence, is the natural way for men to form a *consistent* and *rational* scheme of belief and practice, just notions of God, and of the extent of religious and moral obligations: By this means, they will have a *strait, easy* rule to go by, and build their hopes of happiness upon a solid foundation: Whereas the want of it has introduced *incomprehensible* and *senseless* articles of faith, doctrines prejudicial to *morality*, *dark* and *gloomy* notions of God, and *superstitious* fears destructive of the peace and comfort of men's minds. — Reading the scriptures with impartiality, will inspire sincere and honest minds with *humanity* and *benevolence*, with *moderation* and *forbearance* in lesser differences: But the neglect of it occasions hot and angry controversies, blind and violent disputes, and a zeal without *knowledge* or *discretion*. — Again, by this means common Christians will better understand the *grounds* of their faith, and consequently be more firmly established in it: They will be more fully acquainted with the *intrinsic* excellence of the doctrines of Christianity, and the strength and force of its *external* evidence; and so be believers, not upon the foot of *tradition* and *authority*, which confirms

confirms all religions equally, but upon rational conviction and choice: They will also find it much more easy to detect the sophistry and false reasoning of its adversaries; whose practice 'tis (and in that they must soon be discovered by such as study the scriptures,) to expose and argue against the corruptions and extravagancies of *party-schemes* as true Christianity.

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But the greatest motive of all to a diligent search of the Holy Scriptures, is that mentioned in the text, that in them we *believe we have eternal life*: Therein we have an assurance of a happy immortality, as the reward of true piety and virtue, which to reason is very *obscure* and *doubtful* at least, if at all *probable*. Reason may discover something, *in general*, of a future state of rewards, but gives very little ground to expect that they will be *eternal*: This is the *unspeakable gift* of God through our Lord Jesus Christ. As therefore the gospel is the only sure foundation we have of this glorious hope, we should read it frequently for the satisfaction and comfort of our minds, and carefully examine upon what terms we may hope to be entitled to it: This is the most important interest of our being, and should therefore be the chief object of our study. An error here may be of fatal consequence, which renders our utmost diligence necessary. And as these sacred writings contain the rule by which we shall be judged, and have our eternal condition determined, need any thing be added to excite us to search into them with the greatest exactness, as for the most excellent and beneficial knowledge; and with the greatest impartiality, that we may not be imposed on in so high and momentous a concern. Indolence or



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negligence, in this great point, is certainly most unaccountable and unpardonable stupidity. But I must content myself with just mentioning these things, that I may proceed to what I chiefly design'd, and judge to be the most useful part of a discourse on this subject, *viz.* to lay down some rules for the profitable reading the scriptures. By not observing these rules men have lost all the advantages of this study; and besides from hence have risen all those inconveniences, which have been represented as the natural consequence of allowing the use of them to the common people, and urg'd as arguments against it.

The first thing that I would recommend is, that we come to the search with honest and unprejudic'd minds. In order to the finding out truth in the great points that relate to moral practice, *an acute understanding* is not so necessary as a *sincere upright heart*; and even the *plainness* of the rule itself does not contribute more towards it, than *integrity* and *impartiality* in those who are to be guided by it. *Prejudice* will pervert and darken the plainest rule. And therefore if men apply to the study of the scriptures with minds prepossess'd in favour of any particular scheme; if they take it for granted, before they have examined, that this is the religion of the Bible; all they have to do is, in the best manner they can, to *accommodate* scripture to it. By their being thus pre-determined all farther light is precluded; passages of scripture are strained, and tortured, and darkened by *unnatural* comments; because men search the scripture not to find out the sense of *that*, but to make it speak *their*

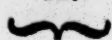
*their own* sense. But, on the contrary, if their minds are free and disengaged, and they have no concern but for truth, the rule of scripture is so plain in all essential points, that they can hardly, with an ordinary degree of judgment, mistake it. In the natural course of things, such an honest ingenuous temper, divested of all prejudice, all attachment to favourite opinions, will lead to the knowledge of every necessary truth, and secure from dangerous and hurtful errors: 'Tis indeed the surest ground-work and foundation of proficiency in divine knowledge; without which the greatest abilities will serve but to *confound* and *puzzle* a man the more, as they furnish a thousand little evasions, and help him to give plausible colours to falshood, and consequently will carry him so much the farther from the end proposed.

2dly, In all our searches into scripture, let us keep this rule constantly in view, that revelation is founded on *reason*, and *natural religion*; and therefore that none of the peculiar doctrines of revealed religion can subvert that, or contradict any of its principles. The religion of nature is eternal, immutable truth, of certain and indispensable authority, and, consequently, can't be superseded, or, in the least, altered by external revelation: And if men had always thought of this, they would never have entertained opinions, upon a *pretended scripture warrant*, dishonourable to God, and destructive of the very first principles of morality: They would never, for instance, have looked on any thing as the revealed truth of God, which is inconsistent with his UNITY, the fundamental article of all religion; never have magnified faith above virtue; or made true piety consist



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consist in outward formality; in an idle, useless superstition; nay, in a violent, injurious zeal, that tramples upon the obligations of justice and charity. They would never, from a few *obscure* passages *rigorously* interpreted, nay, from the *mere sound* of words, have conceived of the Deity as severe and implacable, slow to be appeased, but easy to be affronted; or as an arbitrary sovereign, whose will is his only law; and who, without any regard to their several qualifications, has absolutely determined the happiness of a few of his creatures, and consigned over all the rest, vastly the greater number, to irremediable and endless misery. Had men, I say, formed just notions of natural religion, and considered all its principles as of inviolable and necessary truth, they could never have imagined scripture to contain such sentiments as these, which are evidently repugnant to reason; and, especially, to what the light of nature teaches concerning the unlimited goodness of the great Creator, which is so visible in the frame of the universe, and the general course of providence. Such *injudicious* interpreters of scripture little consider, how much they reproach revelation itself by fathering those absurd doctrines upon it, as well as abuse their own understandings: For the religion of nature cannot but be *true*; what then is the consequence of making any particular revelation oppose and undermine it, but that that revelation is necessarily *false*?

3dly, In interpreting scripture always regard the *general scope* and *design* of it. Let those who have leisure read whole books at once, or, at least, to the end of proper periods, that they may have an entire and connected view of the things contained

tained in them. For it must give us but confused ideas to break off in the midst of a narration; or jumble together parts of different facts; so likewise to read only select portions out of epistles, and those, perhaps, injudiciously chosen, when there is *one design* pursued in the whole, and a continued *reference* throughout. Be careful likewise to attend to the *connection* of the writer, and the thread of his reasoning. For, in all writings, *independent* passages may be urged to serve all manner of purposes; by which means the gravest and most judicious authors may be forced to talk *ludicrously*, and *inconsistently*; and the best and most useful books, which are written with the strictest regard to virtue, be made to countenance *vice* and *impiety*.

And, indeed, it has happened, that the holy scriptures, of all other books, have been most grossly perverted and abused this way. Common writings have, in the main, and unless in the heat of controversy, been treated with fairness and candour enough: But the writings of the Old and New Testament, by picking out of them *little scraps*, and *separate portions*, (which can't be understood but by attending to their connection, nor urged as proofs of any thing, in opposition to the general view of the revelation, without rendering it perfectly unintelligible and useless) the sacred writings, I say, by being thus *mangled* and *torn to pieces*, have been represented as teaching the most absurd, nay, indeed, very impious and immoral doctrines. The building doctrines therefore upon *single texts* may lead us into great and dangerous mistakes. I might illustrate this by a multitude of examples; but I would not be tedious, and therefore

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S E R M. therefore shall confine myself to one instance, viz.  
 X. the words of the prophet *Jeremiah*, *the heart is*  
 Jer. xvii. *deceitful above all things, and desperately wicked, who*  
 9. *can know it?*

This passage, divided from the context, and considered as a general independent proposition, has been used to as strange a purpose as one can well imagine, viz. to prove that men are not acquainted with THEMSELVES; that tho' *self-consciousness* be inseparable from, and the distinguishing excellence and privilege of their being rational, they are strangers to their own hearts, know not what their own views and intentions are, nor what the prevailing habits and dispositions of their minds. This hasty conclusion, I say, has been drawn from these words (which if it was applied to *civil* affairs, as it is to religion, must create the utmost confusion) not only in opposition to the general sense and experience of mankind, but quite contrary to the design of the author himself. This will evidently appear if we consider the connection, and the general reasoning that he is pursuing.

For, in the 5th verse, God is introduced as denouncing a woe against all those, who fix their ultimate dependence on human power and policy. In the 7th and 8th verses is described the wisdom and happiness of trusting in the Lord, and making him our strength. Then follows the text we are considering, which by all rules of good interpretation (since there is not the least mark of the prophet's beginning a new topic of discourse) must be referred to the same argument, and contain another strong reason against making man our confidence; *the heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately wicked, who can know it?* i. e. "There  
 " may

“ may be infinite *devices* and *subtilties* in the hearts  
 “ of men, which thou can’st not understand:  
 “ While they promise thee fair, and make the  
 “ warmest protestations of affection and zeal for  
 “ thy service, their intentions may be the direct  
 “ contrary, and their views *private* and *selfish*:  
 “ Their resolutions are fickle and mutable, and  
 “ many little circumstances may prevail with them  
 “ to change their purposes; and so render their  
 “ promises vain and delusory. Nay, ’tis possible  
 “ for them to arrive at such a pitch of *premedita-*  
 “ *ted* and *desperate* wickedness, as to endeavour,  
 “ even under *friendly* pretences, to undermine  
 “ thine interest. Place not therefore thy supreme  
 “ and ultimate confidence in man, but repose it  
 “ in the unchangeable God; who, as by reason  
 “ of the perfect and necessary rectitude of his na-  
 “ ture he can’t deceive thee, so as he is absolute  
 “ lord of the universe, and the uncontroulable  
 “ disposer of all events, he must be able with ease  
 “ to effect every thing, that is necessary for thy  
 “ security and happiness.”

To the directions above-mention’d about ob-  
 serving the general design of scripture, and the  
 connection of particular passages, which is neces-  
 sary in interpreting all writings whatever; let me  
 add, that ’tis proper for us to make some allow-  
 ances for the *difference* of languages, and the *pe-*  
*culiar phrases* and *idioms* used by the people, for  
 whom the scriptures were *originally* and more *im-*  
*mediately* designed. I shall explain this a little by  
 the words *for ever* and *everlasting*, which are far  
 from having the same force, in the sacred writings,  
 as they generally have in our own language. For  
 ’tis certain that they do not always signify a *strict*  
 and



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and *absolute* eternity, but very frequently a *limited* duration; and the sense of them is, in a great measure, to be determined by the subjects to which they are applied. Thus every one allows, that

Hab. iii. 6. when we read of *everlasting mountains*, the word means very differently from what he does when God is said to be *everlasting*. Again, when 'tis said of Christ, that *he shall reign over the house of*

Luke i. 33. *Jacob for ever, and of his kingdom there shall be no end*, we are to understand no more by it, than that he shall reign to the end of the world; for *then*, we are expressly inform'd by St. Paul, *he*

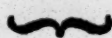
1 Cor. xv. 24, 28. *shall deliver up the kingdom to God, even the Father; — that God may be all in all.* In like manner,

Jude v. 7. when we are told that *Sodom and Gomorrah are set forth for an example, suffering the vengeance of eternal fire*, nothing more is meant than a fire that made a full end of them, and was not extinguish'd, till those cities, with their inhabitants, were utterly consumed. In these passages, and in some others, which seldom regard things of real importance, we must allow for the *change* of languages, and *different use* of words; and the common people will, without much difficulty, fall into the true Interpretation of all passages of this kind, if they follow but the natural and easy method of comparing one part of scripture with another.

4thly, Another rule of great importance is, to explain *dark figurative* passages, parables, metaphors, allegories, &c. by such as are *plain*, and their sense *uncontestable*. Those parts of scripture, which are express'd in the clearest and most simple manner, give a complete and rational account of the perfections and providence of God, and

and a noble scheme of morality. And explaining *dark* passages in a book, which, it is generally believed, can contain no contradictions and inconsistencies, by such as are *plain* and *indisputable*, must be allowed to be the most natural method of interpreting it. And if the common people take care to follow this method, and make any use of their reason, they can't be misled, by the *peculiar stile* and *phrase* of scripture, into unworthy conceptions of God, or mistake the general nature of true religion. Whereas, if they *strain* figures to their utmost height, and put parables and metaphors upon the *rack*, they may, indeed, extort *strange* senses from them, and draw the most *wild* and *extravagant* conclusions.

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In *figurative* ways of speaking there is one grand point intended, which is generally, obvious to a fair inquirer: If he goes beyond this, and argues strictly and rigorously from every circumstance, what may he not deduce from scripture this way? Thus when the conversion and sanctification of a sinner is stiled *regeneration*, and *the new creature*, the general design of these expressions is only this, that he entered upon a new kind of life, has thoroughly changed his principles and methods of acting; and is, indeed, in the temper of his mind, and prevailing dispositions, *quite another creature* from what he was before. But is it not most unaccountable, that any should strain this metaphor so prodigiously, as to make mankind mere *machines*, who can do no more towards their reformation from sin to virtue, than a dead body towards restoring itself to life, or a creature towards giving itself being; and, thereby, render all the exhortations and commands



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1. Thes.  
v. 2.

mands of the gospel to repent, and turn from our evil ways, *impertinent* and *trifling*? The folly of this forced and unnatural method of interpreting is clearly seen in other instances, and universally allowed; for when 'tis said, that *the day of the Lord so cometh as a thief in the night*, who ever imagined, upon the bare force of this metaphor, that it will be attended with injustice and violence? And the true reason why men think justly on the *one*, and not on the other is, that in the one case they proceeded *impartially*, and, being under no *bias*s,, take the natural and most obvious sense of scripture; whereas, in the other, their judgment is already determined in favour of some *party scheme*, which they take all opportunities and all advantages to support.

5thly, I would advise those who want leisure, opportunity, and, perhaps, capacity for *critical* enquiries, to read chiefly the *plain* parts of scripture; those, especially, which describe the perfections and providence of God, or contain practical instructions, and gospel motives and encouragements to virtue; and to trouble themselves but little about doubtful passages that are only *incidental*, and have no immediate connection with the *grand design* of the revelation. For if Christianity be rightly understood in its *practical* doctrines, and as it is a *moral* rule, which without doubt, must be the chief intention of any revelation; other obscurities, about antient customs, manners, sects, philosophy, &c. nay, about any points merely *speculative*, signify just nothing. For as God would never have given a revelation, if the errors of the world had not been of a *practical* nature, but consisted only in absurd *theories*; so

so differences about such Things may always continue, nay, the bulk of the World may know but little about them, and yet all the ends and uses of the christian revelation, as a standing Rule, be completely answered. Those who have time, and proper abilities, may commendably imploy their thoughts about these lesser matters; but others, who have neither a genius, nor opportunities for speculation, act wisely in not meddling with it, but confining themselves to more important and essential points.

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In the last place, as the great end of revelation must be to promote the practice of virtue, we learn from hence a sure rule, by which to judge of the *importance* of the several Doctrines of it: We should lay no stress upon any but as it tends to promote a holy life, and upon all, just in proportion to their tendency to this great and desirable end. And, upon this foot, what will become of most of the *controversies*, that have been so furiously agitated in the Christian world, in which the *best* part of religion is not at all concerned? Learn then to employ your chief zeal about the *weightier matters of the law, doing justly, loving mercy, and walking humbly with God*; and be but little solicitous about speculative opinions, and matters of *doubtful disputation*. Follow after the things that make for peace, and things wherewith one may edify another: For then only will you have studied the scriptures to a right purpose, when ye have purified your souls, in obeying the truth thro' the spirit, unto unfeigned love of the brethren; and learned to practise the wisdom that is from above, which is first pure, then

Micah vi.  
8.

Rom. xiv.  
19.

James iii.  
17.



S E R M. *then peaceable, gentle and easy to be intreated, full*  
 X. *of mercy and good fruits, without partiality, and*  
 without hypocrisy.

I have nothing farther to add, but to com-  
 A c t s. x x. *mend you to God, and to the word of his grace,*  
 32. *which is able to build you up, and give you an in-*  
*heritance among all them that are sanctified.*



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# S E R M O N XI.

## Of Heresy.

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TITUS iii. 10, 11.

*A man that is an heretic, after the first and second admonition reject; knowing that he that is such is subverted, and sinneth, being condemned of himself.*

**T**IS surprising to think, what a vast influence the mere sound of words, artfully manag'd, has upon the generality of mankind, both to confound their judgment, and inflame their passions. This the dealers in controversy seem to be universally aware of, and therefore scarce ever fail to have recourse, to it, as the surest method of engaging on their sides the popular prejudices, and ruining the credit of their adversaries. The favourite terms of reproach made use of against Christianity are *enthusiasm, superstition, priest-craft*, which have a prodigious effect on weak and shallow minds as long as they are apply'd in a *confused general* way, without any distinct or determinate ideas; they operate like a *charm*, while proper care is taken to keep the people in the dark; but by being justly explained lose their *magical* influence entirely, because they appear not to be at all applicable to

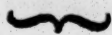
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the *real* doctrines, and duties of the Christian religion, but only to the *supplements, innovations,* and *corruptions* of ignorant and prejudic'd, or of designing and interested men.

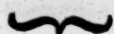
And, among Christians themselves, the word *heresy*, particularly, for want of being rightly understood, has been, in every age, an engine of defamation and violence; by which persons of differing sentiments and interests, or of strong passions, have vented their rage and animosity one against another: It has been charg'd *promiscuously* on truth and error; and the best characters, both for sound knowledge, and integrity, have had the hard fate to fall under the imputation of it; and, in consequence, have been stigmatiz'd as reprobates, debarr'd the privileges of Christian communion, and treated with the utmost contempt and barbarity. As this word has been manag'd by *hot* and *passionate* tempers, by *ecclesiastical politicians*, and *bigotted enthusiasts*, it has been the instrument of endless schisms and confusions: For heresy has been made to signify every thing, be it right or wrong, that contradicts the *established* opinions of the times, and the outcry against it has, generally, been loudest in the most *corrupt* and *degenerate* state. Nay, private Christians, in the course of their religious debates, setting up their sense of scripture as the standard and test of truth, have mutually hereticated and denounced their anathemas against each other; by which unjust method of proceeding, they have not only discourag'd an impartial study of the scriptures, and a free inquiry into the doctrines of the gospel; but have divided, and consequently weaken'd, the interests of our  
holy

holy religion, and expos'd it to the scorn and insults of unbelievers. S E R M.  
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As therefore the word heresy has been apply'd in so *ridiculous*, and withal so *injurious* a manner, to the dishonour, and great prejudice of the best and most useful scheme of religion that ever appear'd in the world; as the misapplication of it will still continue to produce the same evils; and finally, as the thing itself is of the highest consequence, it being a heinous offence against *Christian sincerity*, tho' it has been almost constantly misunderstood, either thro' ignorance, partiality, or craft, and made to signify mere errors, or only supposed errors in *speculation*, of no importance to the cause of solid virtue, or the happiness of mankind; these being consider'd, I say, it may be useful for us to enquire into the true nature of it: And for this purpose, I have chosen these words of *St. Paul*, to be the subject of the following discourse, in which he so particularly characterizes an heretic, that we can't miss knowing him, if we attend to his description, and gives directions to *Titus* in what manner to deal with him: *A man that is an heretic, &c.* And, indeed, all the other accounts we have of this matter are so clear and express, and have so little of difficulty or ambiguity in them, that 'tis scarce possible the word should be abus'd in that gross manner it has been, and perverted from its original design, if men had not consulted their own *passions* and *prejudices* more than the Holy Scriptures; and if the signification of it had not been artfully chang'd to serve *a turn*, whereby the ignorant and unwary have been impos'd on in all ages: For as these are too much under *management*,



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*ment*, and dispos'd to speak as they are *taught*, instead of examining for themselves into the nature and reason of things, 'tis no wonder that they call every one an heretic, that is declar'd to be such by their *superiors*, those especially to whom they have resign'd the direction of their *consciences*; 'tis no wonder, that they apply to him all the bad characters which they find of heretics in the New Testament, and consequently consider him as an *infamous* person, and devoted to *destruction*; or, that having given him such a monstrous and frightful dress, they hunt him down, and pursue him with *insolence* and *cruelty*. This is the natural consequence of implicit faith, and an indiscreet, intemperate zeal. But to proceed more directly to the point before us.

Acts v.

17.

Chap. xv.

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Ch. xxiv.

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Ch. xxvi.

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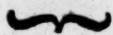
HERESY, in the New Testament, is, most commonly, used in an *indifferent* sense, and, but seldom, in a *bad* one. It, generally, signifies no more than a *sect* or *party* in religion. Thus we read of *the sect*, or heresy, of the Sadducees; of *the sect*, or heresy, of the Pharisees; St. Paul is stil'd a *ringleader of the sect*, or heresy, of the Nazarenes; and he says of himself, that *after the strictest sect* (where the same *Greek* word is used) of the *Jewish* religion, he lived a *Pharisee*: In this last passage, particularly, nothing can be more plain than that the word has an *innocent meaning*; since the Apostle rather *commends*, than charges himself with any thing *criminal*, for having been a *Pharisee* before his conversion to the Christian faith. And we find it applied in the same manner, *Acts* xxviii. 22. where, upon St. Paul's coming to *Rome*, we are told, that the *Jews*, who inhabited there, desired to hear his thoughts of

of Christianity, and what he had to offer in defense of it; for, say they, *as concerning this sect, or heresy, we know, that every where it is spoken against.* I shall mention but one text more, and that is 1 Cor. xi. 19. *for there must also be heresies among you, that they who are approved may be made manifest.* The evident design of which is, that, considering the various tempers of men, their different views, passions, prejudices, their selfishness, ambition, vanity, and the like, it was natural to expect, that they would divide into parties about *religion*, as well as about *politics*, and the *civil* affairs of life; and that the providence of God wisely permitted this for the trial of their *integrity*, and to distinguish the indolent, careless, and insincere from the real Friends of truth, persons of an honest, inquisitive, and ingenuous temper.

Now, according to this account, the general notion of an heretic is no more than this, *viz.* one that sets up to be the *head*, or *chooses* to join himself to a particular religious sect: I say who makes this the matter of his *choice*, because it is implied in the original signification of the word; and besides, nothing can be supposed to have any concern with religion, but what is a *voluntary* action. An heretic therefore, in a bad sense, must be one, who *knowingly* espouses a false doctrine, is *insincere* in his profession, and asserts and defends what he is *convinced* is contrary to Christianity, and, consequently one, who maintains and supports the interest of a faction, to serve some base designs. This will appear, beyond dispute, when we have considered the text, and compared it with the general tenour of the New Testament.



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According to St *Paul's* account in the Text, an heretic is not only *subverted*, or turn'd aside from the true faith; he not only entertains wrong sentiments of Christianity; but *sinneth*, i. e. doth this *wilfully*, and with an *ill* intention. Such as have merely an erroneous judgment can't be here meant, because errors of the understanding, consider'd in themselves, are not *criminal*, but naturally arise from the weakness and fallibility of human reason: They are, in most cases, *involuntary*, in many *unavoidable*. And, therefore, as all moral evil depends upon the error and obliquity of the will, the persons, described by the Apostle as *sinners*, must be *wilful* corrupters and opposers of the Christian religion; such whose minds are perverted by irregular dispositions and appetites; and who have resolved to sacrifice truth and virtue to the gratification of their sensual desires. And that this is the real case appears farther from hence, that the crime spoken of in the text is of such a nature, as required not *instruction*, but *admonition*; from hence, I say, it evidently follows, that the fault lay in the *will*, and not in the *understanding*. For every one knows, that the only way to rectify a mistaken judgment is by the use of reason and argument, by exposing the false grounds on which it is formed, removing prejudices, and representing matters in a clear and proper light; and that to advise a man, in an authoritative way, and without informing his understanding better, to alter his apprehension and judgment of things, and expect to make a convert of him merely by telling him he is in the wrong, be it with ever so *solemn*, *imperious*, and *magisterial* an air, is to the last degree absurd and ridiculous. But he may,  
very

very rationally, be admonished, or reprov'd, with relation to those errors that depend intirely upon the *will*, and are owing to a *free choice*, because, in every such case, he must *know* himself to be out of the way, and has all the necessary means of a reformation in his own power. St. *Paul*, therefore, expressly mentions this circumstance, which renders that of an heretic a compleatly bad character, *viz.* that he is *condemn'd of himself*, or acts against the sense of his own mind, and the dictates of his reason and conscience. He is one that makes religion a cloak for his immoralities, and espouses and propagates what he knows to be false, to promote the ends of his ambition, covetousness, or sensual pleasure; who, indeed, thinks it his interest to retain the name of a Christian, and, in that circumstance only, differs from a thorough and wilful *apostate* from Christianity, but which incurs the greater guilt may, perhaps, be hard to determine; for as the one rejects the Christian religion altogether, the other out of choice corrupts it, and opposes its true doctrines, even while he pretends to believe and reverence its authority: Such as these, I say, persons of such *vile* and *dishonest* principles, and of so *flagitious* a character, are the heretics condemned by St. *Paul*; and, therefore, to fix it as a term of reproach on any, in whom there does not appear *hatred* of the truth, a *sensual* mind, and a *profligate* conscience, must be unchristian and scandalous.

And if we examine other passages of the New Testament, we shall find that they all concur in giving us the same idea of heresy: 'Tis represented as *a work of the flesh*, because it has its foundation in the corrupt inclinations of human nature. Gal. v. 20.

'Tis



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Gal. v. 20.

'Tis reckon'd amongst the most heinous and execrable vices, such as *adultery, idolatry, hatred, variance, seditions, murders*. And heretics are constantly describ'd as men of no *probity* or *honour*, strangers to all the principles of virtue, and embracing such opinions only as were calculated for the gratification of irregular appetites, and advancing *selfish* and *worldly* views. Thus St. Paul writes to Timothy concerning Hymeneus and Alexander, that, *having put away a good conscience,*

1 Tim. i. they had *made shipwreck of faith*. And of those  
19. *false prophets*, of whom St. Peter foretold that they should arise, *bringing in damnable heresies*, this character is given, with regard to their prophaneness and impiety towards God, that they

2 Pet. ii. would *deny the Lord that bought them*. The per-  
1. son here meant is not, as some apprehend, the Lord Jesus Christ, but God the father, the supreme Lord and governor of the world, concerning whom Moses put this question to the *Israelites*, *is he not thy father who hath bought thee?* because the Greek word, signifying *supreme* master, or ruler, is never once used when Christ is spoken of, but always of the Father; and, besides, in the parallel text of St. Jude, the supreme Lord is expressly *distinguished* from the Lord Jesus Christ.

Deut. xxxii. 6. His words are, *for there are certain men crept in, unawares, who were before, of old, ordain'd to this condemnation, ungodly men, turning the grace of our God into lasciviousness, and denying the only Lord God, and our Lord Jesus Christ*. The monstrous character of these heretics may be seen throughout this whole chapter of St. Peter, and almost to the end of St. Jude's Epistle: And the same general representation is given of them, in all the  
Ver. 4. epistles

epistles of St. Paul, viz. that they designed not S E R M. XI.  
 to serve our Lord Jesus Christ but their own bellies; Rom. xvi. 18.  
 and taught things which they ought not for filthy lu- Tit. i. 11.  
 cre's sake; speaking lies in hypocrisy, and having 1 Tim. iv. 2.  
 their conscience seared with an hot iron. And tho' they might, sometimes, put on the outward ap-  
 pearance of gentleness and humanity, they were  
 still, to use our Saviour's phrase, but *wolves in* Mat. vii. 15.  
*sheeps-cloathing*; and only endeavoured, under that  
 specious pretence, to disguise their covetousness,  
 rapine, and cruelty, till they might be more *con-*  
*veniently* exercis'd. Having thus largely stated  
 the scripture account of heresy, suffer me to make  
 some observations upon it. And,

1<sup>st</sup>. It appears from what has been said, that  
 no mere error of the judgment can be heresy: For  
 heresy is a high degree of wickedness; and neces-  
 sarily supposes irregularity of the affections, and  
 a deprav'd and vicious choice: Whereas erroneous  
 conceptions and apprehensions of things are no  
 crime at all, but natural to mankind in the present  
 weak and imperfect state of their faculties. Nay,  
 I think, it may be affirmed, not only that no mere  
 error of the judgment can be heresy; but also that  
 there can be no heresy, where there is, properly  
 speaking, an error of the Judgment: This may be  
 owing to laziness, prejudice, partial examination,  
 and other very bad causes; but heresy it cannot  
 be, as long as a man believes he is in the right,  
 however he came to work himself into such a per-  
 suasion. For an heretic, in St. Paul's account, is  
 one that knows he teaches and propagates a false  
 doctrine; who does it deliberately, and against the  
 clear suggestions and dictates of his conscience;  
 either from a principle of vanity, and to make  
 himself



S E R M. himself considerable as the head and leader of a  
 XI. sect; or to advance his temporal interest.

2dly, We may infer from the foregoing discourse, that no *honest* man can possibly be an heretic. He may, indeed, have *errors* (and who is there among us that has not) nay, he may err in points of *importance* too, but his mistakes can't be *dangerous* while he takes care to maintain a good conscience. For human nature is, in its very make and constitution, weak and fallible; and considering men's different capacities, turn of understanding, education, and the like, *different*, and, consequently, *erroneous* sentiments, (for truth can't *vary* from itself, but must always be *consistent* and *uniform*) I say different, and, consequently, erroneous sentiments seem to be unavoidable. And 'tis not to be doubted, but that the wise and merciful governor of the world will make great allowances for the imperfection of our knowledge, the confusion of our reasonings, and the many little prejudices that, *insensibly*, bias and mislead the mind in this state of immaturity and darkness.

I would ask, particularly, what is the ground of our acceptance with God under the dispensation of the gospel? Is it *absolute perfection*, or *sincerity*? If *perfection* be required of us, an exact and adequate knowledge of all the parts of the Christian revelation, and a strict invariable obedience to the precepts of it; or, in other words, if it be indispensably necessary to our obtaining the divine favour, that we be free from all errors of the *understanding*, and from all defects in our *moral* conduct; the whole race of mankind must be *reprobated*, — equally and necessarily subject to condemnation. For if we say that we have no  
 sin,

*sin*, and, consequently, no erroneous judgments, from whence all irregular practices proceed, *we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us.* But if a *sincere* desire to know and do the will of God be

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1 John. i.

the only condition of obtaining the Christian salvation, as it must be, in the present circumstances of mankind, unless our future happiness depends upon an *impossibility*; must not all mistakes, which are consistent with *general sincerity*, be consistent, likewise, with a state of *favour* with God? And, consequently, if we condemn those for *party differences*, in whose lives there appear all the fruits of a good conscience, and who give the greatest evidence, that can reasonably be desired, of their being honest and impartial, by a steady pursuit of virtue, and an inflexible adherence to it, under the utmost discouragements and difficulties, must not this be a *rash* and *unrighteous* judgment? To proceed one step farther, has not the scripture expressly declared, that *whosoever believeth that Jesus is the Christ, is born of God?* And shall we, then, insist on *private articles* of our own, and right notions in *intricate* and *perplexing* controversies; and presumptuously pronounce all who have not the same strength of understanding, and the same opportunities and advantages for improving in knowledge, or perhaps only, the same *confidence* with ourselves, to be forsaken of God, and mark'd out for destruction? The resolving these few plain questions will soon shew a considerate mind, the folly and danger of such hard and unmerciful censures, which are evil, in a high degree, when they are only *rash* and *precipitate*; and much more so, when they proceed from *malice*, and are accompanied with a *contemptuous* and *scornful* treatment



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ment of our brethren ; but most of all, when those who are so forward to condemn others for *speculative* errors, are, themselves, chargeable with *immoral* practices ; for this is most impudent and monstrous *hypocrisy*. And yet, how strange and unaccountable soever it may seem, such persons are frequently the most noisy and violent advocates for orthodoxy ; either, perhaps, to *palliate* their vices, and screen them from public view ; or else, thinking to make some *atonement* for them by a fierce and outrageous zeal for *trifles*. To these the words of our Saviour are immediately directed : *Why beholdest thou the mote that is in thy brother's eye, but considerest not the beam that is in thine own eye ? Or how wilt thou say to thy brother, let me pull out the mote out of thine eye, and behold, a beam is in thine own eye ? Thou hypocrite, first cast out the beam out of thine own eye, and then shalt thou see clearly to cast out the mote out of thy brother's eye.*

Matt. vii.  
3, 4, 5.

This framing Christianity according to the model of *private opinions*, and *party peculiarities*, and imposing them on conscience under the penalty of eternal damnation, has been one of the most *successful engines* against its cause and interest ; and would, probably, were it not for the superintendency of a watchful and all powerful providence, have been, long ere this time, the *utter subversion* of our holy religion : And nothing has been the instrument of more confusion in the world, or of greater distress and injury to civil society : I would therefore, was I capable, in order to possess your minds with a *just horror*, represent the prodigious evil of it in the strongest and most pathetic terms. — Hence it is, that religion, among so many, is degenerated into *form and ceremony*, and that a  
*blind*

*blind injurious zeal* supplies the place of the power of godliness. — From hence have arisen so many *absurd, inconsistent, and self-contradictory* schemes of doctrine, which have exposed our religion to contempt. — Hence also has proceeded hypocrisy, and a denying the truth, in conformity to the constitutions of men in power, in order to secure their favour, and avoid the cruel effects of their *religious vengeance*; and, consequently, secret *infidelity* under the mask of an outward profession. — And as for treachery and oppression, inveterate hatreds, bitter revilings, irreconcilable animosities, poverty and slavery, private murders and public massacres, unsettling governments by tumults and insurrections, and almost all other kinds of evil, have they not sprang from *the same root of bitterness*? — Has not the charge of heresy been thought a justification of such vile enormities, as we may defy *irreligion*, or even *atheism itself*, to exceed? — And can any of us allow ourselves in a practice, which is productive of such infinite disorder and misery, if we have only the common seeds of *humanity* in our nature, much less if we regard the honour of the *Christian religion*?

3dly, If heresy be an error of the *will*, and such only can be guilty of it who are *condemn'd of themselves*, how can we certainly know, in most cases at least, whether a man be an heretic or not? Let each of us put this question to himself impartially, and if we can't answer it to our satisfaction, let us, however, learn thus much from our ignorance, to be *modest* in the censures we pass upon others. Indeed, in the first age of Christianity, when the extraordinary gifts of the Holy Ghost were communicated,



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1 Cor. xii.  
10.

municated, of which one was the gift of *discerning spirits*, this matter might be more easily decided. And *Titus*, particularly, to whom *St. Paul* directs the advice in the text, can't be suppos'd, considering his character and office, to have been without these powers. But what rule have we, now these extraordinary illuminations and assistances are *ceased*, by which to conduct ourselves in inquiries of this nature?

If it be said, that such wicked deceivers are, generally, *known by their fruits*, and that their vitious lives will shew us by what views they are acted, and the vile design of their imposture: I answer, that, even upon this supposition, I should think it better that they be rejected for their *immorality*, which is notorious and palpable, than for *heresy*, of which, perhaps, we can't so certainly judge. But what if they are so cautious as to keep clear of all *open* vices, and effect an air of *sanctity*, in order the more effectually to secure their end; in such cases as these, I say, what can we do, be they ever so wicked in *principle* and *intention*, but leave them to God the supreme and only judge of conscience? And since 'tis so difficult for us, in most instances, certainly to judge of heresy, why should we be forward to charge it on our brethren, for every *trifling difference* of their sentiments from ours? And, above all, why should we be so *unrighteous* as to impute it to men of *honest* principles, and *exemplary* lives, who, as has been shewn, are quite the reverse of the heretics mention'd in the New Testament; and, if *St. Paul's* authority be of any weight, cannot possibly have incurr'd that guilt?

But

But after all, the truths which they deny are so clear, and supported by such evidence, as necessarily to approve themselves to every honest and impartial inquirer; and therefore you are positive, that, notwithstanding their seeming piety, and strictness of outward morals, there is a *latent* corruption in their hearts, and they are influenced by some evil affection or other, tho' it does not appear *publickly*; either by a love of singularity, pride, ambition, &c. or are under the power of some vitious prejudice. This is constantly said by *bigots* and *enthusiasts*, and especially by such as are themselves most in the wrong, notwithstanding the most solemn and repeated declarations of their opponents to the contrary, and, consequently, as it will *serve* for *either* side of *any* question, can have no effect on sober and considerate minds, but will be look'd upon as the result of *passion* and *partiality*. But besides, why are we so conceited of our own understandings? Are we infallibly sure that we are in the right? Modesty forbids us directly to assert this, tho' all such reasonings necessarily imply it: Or if we were, would it not be much more excusable to suppose our neighbour's *judgment* weaker than ours, than to reproach his *honesty*? I shall only add,

In the fourth and last place, that tho' it be a point of great nicety to judge of heresy in particular instances, the persons who come *nearest* the character of the old heretics are *violent party-men*, who confine Christianity to their own faction, and excommunicate all that take the liberty to differ from them; the *rigid imposers* of human schemes of doctrine, and modes of worship, as *essential* branches of religion, and *laws binding conscience*;

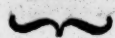
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these,



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these, I say, are most like the heretics condemn'd in scripture, notwithstanding their influence and presumption. The common people, indeed, who help to encourage and support this spiritual tyranny, may be *innocent deluded* enthusiasts; but the first *contrivers*, and the *conducters* of it, especially when it appears to have a direct tendency to wealth, grandeur, and luxury, may justly be suspected of *base* and *irregular* views; or, in the language of St. Paul, to be *men of corrupt minds, and destitute of the truth*, who suppose *that gain is godliness*. A turbulent, factious, and persecuting spirit is one of the *surest marks* of heresy. And when the substance of religion is placed in trifling speculations, *which* have no manner of connection with virtue and morality, in abstruse incomprehensible mysteries, or in outward shew and ceremony, we may certainly conclude, that if this does not proceed from a very *weak head*, it must spring from a *dishonest heart*.

1 Tim.  
vi. 5.

In order, therefore, to keep at the *utmost distance* from heresy, let us be modest and charitable in our censures, and not forward to fasten the infamy of it upon others. Let us fix on what party we will, even the *worst* and most *erroneous*, and we shall find the greatest reason to believe, that there are in it many persons of real probity and virtue, notwithstanding the *absurdity*: or *dangerous tendency* of their principles. And therefore to condemn whole bodies, in the *gross*, merely for their *distinctive opinions*, without considering that we ourselves may be mistaken, or making proper allowances, with respect to others, for the fallibility of human understanding, for prejudices of education, and the particular disadvantages they may

may labour under, is not only a high strain of *pride* and *arrogance*; it not only argues great *ignorance* of human nature; but is contrary to all the principles of *justice*, *truth*, and *goodness*, which, both the natural reason of our minds, and the Christian revelation inculcate, as of indispensable authority, and infinitely preferable to the most *sound* and *orthodox* faith, and the largest extent of *speculative* knowledge. For *tho' I understand all mysteries, and all knowledge, and tho' I have all faith, so that I could remove mountains, and have not charity, I am nothing. Charity vaunteth not itself, is not puffed up, doth not behave itself unseemly;—thinketh no evil;—believeth all things, hopeth all things. Now the God of patience and consolation grant you to be like minded, one towards another, according to Christ Jesus; that ye may, with one mind, and one mouth, glorify God, even the father of our Lord Jesus Christ. Wherefore receive ye one another, as Christ also hath receiv'd us, to the glory of God.*

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# S E R M O N XII.

## Of S C H I S M.

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I C O R. xii. 25.

*That there should be no Schism in the body,  
but that the members should have the same  
care one for another.*

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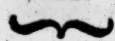
**H**AVING, in my last discourse, considered and explained the nature of *heresy*, I intend, in this, to treat of *schism*, its almost inseparable companion. It must indeed seem very strange to every one, who is acquainted with the mild and amiable spirit of Christianity, that the professors of a religion, which so strictly enjoins gentleness, moderation, and universal charity, should be so forward to divide and crumble into *parties*, and oppose one another with so much *rage* and *violence*: This is quite unnatural as we are *men*, united by the bond of one common nature, one common interest; but much more out of character as we are *Christians*, whose peculiar distinction from professors of all other religions, if we act upon the principles that true Christianity inspires, will be mutual forbearance, harmony and peace. But yet the matter of fact is uncontestable,

testable, and won't admit of any evasion. Selfishness, pride, the desire of dominion, a tyrannical imposing spirit, and sometimes perhaps (for I fear that has been but seldom the case) mere prejudice void of any direct ill design, have occasioned as great and dangerous factions in the *church*, as were ever fomented, by the same bad causes, against the Security and peace of *civil government*. The Christian society has been split into infinite *divisions* and *subdivisions*, of separate and inconsistent interests, excommunicating, reviling, and almost always, when they had it in their power, *persecuting* each other; by which the common cause has been exposed and weakened; and Christianity itself, which is most admirably adapted to civilize mankind, to calm and soften boisterous and rugged tempers, and promote universal order and happiness, has been the means of irritating and inflaming their passions, and by a most strange and melancholy perversion of it, the source of discord, confusion, and misery.

And what is it that has been the *main subject* of the most bitter, uncharitable, and outrageous contentions? That has rais'd so many *factions* under the name of Christian societies? And not only destroy'd the peace and communion of the church, but in many cases, broke through all the ties of friendship, natural affection, and common humanity? — Have these evils sprung from a zeal for the eternal and unchangeable obligations of *morality*? — From a concern for *justice*, *truth*, and *mercy*, or an emulation to excel in *substantial* and *useful* virtue? — Quite the contrary. Almost all the schisms and disturbances that have happened in the Christian world (and



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*church history* furnishes us with a pretty large catalogue) have been about *mere trifles*, things of very little consequence to true Christianity, and often-times repugnant and dishonourable to it; such as, submission to *ecclesiastical* authority, the belief of *mysteries* of which we have no ideas, and conformity to rites and ceremonies of *human* institution, which serve but to *encumber* and *debase* the rational worship of the Deity, and render it *weak* and *superstitious*. Thus we find, that very soon after the Apostolic age, a *little insignificant* and *senseless* controversy, about the day of keeping *Easter*, occasioned a terrible confusion and schism in the Christian church; the *western* churches separating, and renouncing communion with the *eastern*, for several years together. And have not some of the hottest disputes since been about the *secret decrees* of God, and, metaphysical subtilities relating to his *essence*, and manner of *subsisting*, about the *validity* or *nullity* of ministerial ordinations, praying with, or without a form, *bowings*, *crossings*, *garments*, and other outward modifications of piety, which are but the *circumstantials*, and very inconsiderable ones, at best, of religion; and can't, in my judgment, be reckon'd *essential*, or even *important* branches of any religion that is fit for mankind to observe, or their maker to require, without entertaining very *low* thoughts of the wisdom of God, and a most *contemptible* opinion of human nature. And since these divisions among Christians are such a reproach to their character, and have been urg'd as objections against the excellent doctrine they profess, which is the most *benevolent* and *peaceable* that ever appeared in the world; since they have  
produc'd

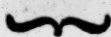
produc'd, and will always necessarily produce, the most mischievous and fatal effects, injurious to true piety and virtue, and to the interest of civil society; and finally, since, in almost every controversy, we find both the contending parties forward to charge the *schism* on each other, as indeed it is too natural, when the passions are strongly engaged, for both to run *unwarrantable lengths* in the heat of their animosity and opposition; upon these accounts, I say, it must be of equal advantage to us to form right notions of schism, as of heresy: That, on the one hand, we may never incur the guilt of a crime so aggravated, (when it is at all a crime) and attended with such destructive consequences; nor, on the other, be at all alarm'd at it, when it is only a *mere name*, and *brand of infamy*.

Schism, in its original signification, is no more than a *rent*, or a *division*. Accordingly in all the passages of the New Testament, except the text, where the words *σχισμα* and *σχισματι* are used, they are thus rendered by our translators. So we read, in one of our Saviour's allusions, that a *piece of new cloath, put to an old garment taketh from the garment, and the rent is made worse*.  
 We read likewise of a *division*, or schism, *among the people*, i. e. of their entertaining different sentiments of Christ. Several other passages might be added, but these two are sufficient to shew that the word schism, as well as heresy, is us'd in an *indifferent* sense; and that the lawfulness or unlawfulness of it, is entirely to be determined by *circumstances*. Common use, indeed, in our own language, always affixes to the term an idea of *guilt*; and therefore I am obliged in the follow-



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ing discourse, in order to adapt it to modern disputes, to consider it as a *criminal vitious* thing, and shall endeavour to state the true notion of it under that character. In general then, there can be no such thing as schism, but in cases where there is an obligation to *unity* and *communion*, so that in order to define the nature of it justly, we must find out some *center* of union, which is common to all Christians: And this must be either *uniformity* of sentiment in matters of speculative belief, or in external modes of worship and discipline; or else, if it be unreasonable to expect either of these, the only center of unity that remains is *charity* and *mutual forbearance*, notwithstanding lesser differences, where there is an assent to all the necessary principles of Christian faith \*, and the profession of Christianity is prov'd to be sincere by a regular and virtuous life.

\* If it be ask'd, what these necessary principles are? The answer is easy, *viz.* that unless we will leave room for multiplying articles of faith *infinitely*, they can be no other than what are expressly requir'd to be believ'd, in order to our obtaining the Christian salvation. And of this kind we find nothing in the whole New Testament but that *single* article, that "Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God," including in it the belief of his miracles, and resurrection, and the extraordinary powers communicated to the Apostles, which are the standing evidence of the truth of the gospel. There are two passages, in St. John's first epistle, so distinct, and full to this purpose, that they can't be evaded by any arts of criticism, but what will confound and darken the plainest sense of words, and destroy the very use of language; *Whosoever shall confess that Jesus is the Son of God, God dwelleth in him and he in God*; chap. iv. 15. and again, *Whosoever believeth that Jesus is the Christ, is born of God*, chap. v. 1. So that every one that assents to this fundamental truth, and sincerely endeavours to understand the revelation, and act according to it, must be a

Let

Let us examine this matter distinctly.

And,

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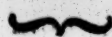
1. As for *uniformity* of sentiment in matters of *speculative belief*, that can never be the *common center* of Christian unity, because it is in the nature of things *impossible*. For in order to this, all mankind must have exactly the same strength of understanding, the same advantages, the same manner of education, the same passions, prejudices, and interests; but as there is an almost *infinite variety* in all these respects, differences of opinion will necessarily arise; and the contrary can't be hop'd for by any one that knows human nature, much less can it be required by the infinite wisdom of our supreme governour. Besides, if all Christians must concur in the same way of thinking about every controversy in religion, whose opinion shall prevail; and be made the *public standard*? — Are the *majority* to decide for us? — How shall we determine, without collecting the vote of every individual, who are the *majority*? — The greatest numbers in our own, or any other particular Country, may be the *minor* part with respect to the whole body of Christians; and, besides, the *real sense* of the people may be very different from establish'd forms, and in many instances, from their own public profession. But allowing we could settle this first and most essential point, which, in truth, can hardly be settled, are the

true Christian, and intitled to the *friendship* and *communion* of Christians; and to deny him this privilege, on *whimsical* notions of the importance, or necessity of particular schemes, not *expressly* warranted and supported by scriptures, is unjust, antichristian, and *schismatical*.

majority



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majority always in the *right*? Or must we, for the sake of uniformity, profess (*believe* we cannot) against truth and reason? Will not this make all religion *dissimulation* and *hypocrisy*? Will it not drive us back to all the errors and superstitions of *Popery*? Nay, will it not oblige us to renounce even Christianity itself for the *Mahometan* imposture, or *Pagan* idolatry, both of which, if the vote of the *majority* is to determine, seem to stand upon a much better foundation? This is undoubtedly the point in which this principle must terminate, if pursued through all its just and natural consequences; for the *majority* of Christians have no more a right to judge for the *whole body* of Christians, than the *greatest part* of mankind for *all the rest* of mankind.

But if *uniformity* of opinion can't be secured in this way; shall we not be govern'd by the most *learned* and *pious* Christians, who are neither influenced by irregular passion, nor sway'd by criminal prejudice, and have examined all the parts of religion with the greatest exactness and impartiality? I answer, that who are *really* the most learned and pious will be matter of endless dispute, and can never be *certainly* fix'd. Or if it could, there is still this objection against admitting their judgment as a *decisive* rule, that they are *fallible* as well as others; and have frequently asserted and maintain'd such principles, as derogate highly from the honour of God, and are of vast disservice to religion. — Must we then give up the direction of our faith to our *spiritual instructors*, the *governours* of the church? This will leave us in equal confusion and uncertainty. — For who are they? — If the *ecclesiastices* of every nation are to appoint and settle

settle the *national* faith, there is likely to be the same *variety* and *inconsistency* in it, as if it was left to every man's own private reason; or if the greatest number are to fix the *general* faith of Christians, we must give up our *understandings*, our *senses*, our *humanity*, for the follies and cruelties of *Popish* superstition. Or finally, if we are to submit to the religion of the *civil magistrate*, exactly the same consequences will follow from it; the same inconsistency of principles and practices, all suppos'd to be essential parts of the one true religion (which by the way, is making religion itself a *contradiction*.) For this way of establishing *uniformity* of opinion under one government will, in different countries, as necessarily establish a *variety*; and be, withal, of equal, nay of much greater service to *Mahometanism*, and *Heathenism*, than to the cause of Christianity. It appears then from what has been said, that to endeavour to bring all mankind to the same sentiments in matters of religious controversy is an *absurd*, *romantic* scheme, and represents religion as nothing else but outward *formality*, *artifice*, and *craft*, or a mere piece of *state-convenience* and *policy*.

The same may be said of *uniformity* in *external modes* of worship and discipline, *viz.* that this, likewise, cannot be a necessary term of Christian communion. For it will be altogether as difficult to determine, who are to settle external rites and ceremonies, and forms of church-government, as articles of speculative belief; and the very same wild consequences will follow, from allowing it to the *majority*, the *church*, or the *civil magistrate*, in one case, as in the other. Besides, the lawfulness, expediency, or divine authority of any particular



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particular form is as much a matter of *private* opinion and speculation, as the truth or falshood of doctrinal propositions: And therefore, it is as natural to expect a *variety* of sentiments about it.

Indeed the plain truth of the case lies here. Every man has an *unalienable* right to judge, for himself, what principles are just and rational, and what form of religion is most acceptable to God. It is absolute nonsense to talk of any thing in religion, that is not entirely founded on inward *conviction*, and *choice*. If we exclude this, and suppose that private persons are bound to submit to a *public* conscience, and to *establish'd* notions of order and decency, we build religion on the *ruins* of human reason; and may indeed make it *any thing*, be it ever so weak and trifling, ever so much mischievous and hurtful, ever so contrary to the moral perfections of God, and the immutable principles of truth and righteousness. And at this rate is it worthy a *wise* man's concern? Can it deserve to be *supported*? Would it not rather be for the interest of mankind, if it was absolutely *banish'd* the world? On the contrary, if it be (as it must if it be any thing at all) a *personal* thing, and all are at liberty to judge and determine for themselves, in every circumstance, what is fit and proper; and if Christianity makes no alteration in men's *natural rights*; the inference to be made from hence is most obvious and undeniable, *viz.* that no mere difference of opinion, either in matters of speculative belief, or about outward forms of worship and discipline, can destroy necessary Christian unity, which, upon every other supposition, is a *chimera*, an absolute *impossibility*.

If

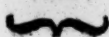
If this be allow'd, it may be ask'd, what will become of *public order*? I answer, what is *public order*? It can't be *uniformity* in matters of mere opinion, for that has been shewn to be impossible; and there will be no more *disorder* from a variety of sentiments in religion, than from different schemes of philosophy, politics, oeconomy, or different rules of civil life; nay, than from the difference of men's faces, natural tempers, circumstances, or the infinite variety that appears in the constitution of the universe, which yet, upon the whole, is perfectly *harmonious* and *beautiful*. The *right order* of things with respect to mankind, who are intelligent beings, and indu'd with moral powers, is, when *every individual* exercises his reason, and forms his notions of religion for himself, and the more strictly this *order* is preserv'd, differences, in lesser matters, will be more unavoidable and necessary. — They are only *imaginary* rules or order of human contrivance, perverting the *natural order* that God has establish'd, with which such differences are at all inconsistent.

Let me add to this, that a *variety* of sentiments in religion, while moderation and mutual charity are maintained, can do no hurt, as well as create no confusion; whereas an attempt to introduce *public uniformity* and the imposing *unscriptural* terms of communion, have been a constant source of schisms in the church, and as long as they continue, will infallibly keep alive a spirit of animosity, and perpetuate contention and violence.

And finally, when there is a *difference* of opinions, and a *variety* of outward forms, this is just such a state of things as a wise man would expect if all were *honest* and *impartial* inquirers; whereas  
if



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if *one sett* of principles, and the *same scheme* of worship and discipline, not diversify'd in the minutest circumstance, were universally to prevail, it would not look like *human nature*; it would have nothing of the appearance of *sincerity*; and, consequently, must lead an indifferent spectator to conclude, that religion was all *complaisance*, *courtlinefs*, and *carnal policy*, and did not spring from a conviction of the understanding, or a free deliberate choice.

From what has been said, I would make a few observations relating to the Nature and Guilt of schism, and so conclude. And,

1<sup>st</sup>. It appears, that let there be ever so many *differences* amongst Christians, as long as *mutual charity* is preserv'd, there cannot be the guilt of schism. Even the church of *Rome*, so corrupt as it is, and so grossly as it has perverted the doctrines and institutions of the Christian religion, would not be *schismatical*, if it did not confine Christianity to its own faction, and make party-peculiarities necessary terms of communion; and thereby renounce all friendship and unity with Christians of a different persuasion. A man that holds the common faith of the Gospel, leads a holy life, behaves peaceably, and has charity for all, notwithstanding the little varieties by which they are distinguished from each other, does not differ from any church so far as it is form'd on the *essential* principles of Christianity; but only takes that liberty of judging for himself, which *reason* allows, and *revelation* confirms to him; a liberty to differ from *fallible* expositions of scripture, from *civil* constitutions, or *ecclesiastical* ordinances of rather less authority. For if any person's

son's judgment ought to be submitted to as a *public* standard, it should certainly be that of the civil magistrate; who, generally speaking, must have less temptation, than those who pretend to a *distinct* and *independent* jurisdiction, to introduce such schemes of religion as are injurious to mankind, and destructive of the security, order, and happiness of society. So that *alienation* of affection, and a *turbulent, excommunicating* spirit, are the essence of schism, and not mere difference of opinion; not the use of *different* ceremonies, or of *no* ceremonies at all; or joining ourselves to any particular religious communion. For, according to St. Paul, (who, in several passages blames the *Corinthians* for divisions or schisms among themselves in the same community) this crime may be committed where there is no separation from a particular church: And consequently they that *differ uncharitably*, whether they belong all to one, or form distinct worshipping assemblies (and they alone) are schismatics; and to throw the odium and infamy of this character on any *peaceable* denominations of Christians, is mere scandal and calumny.

2dly, Differences among Christians are not only *innocent*, while unity of affection is preserved, but there are many cases, in which a separation from a particular church is absolutely *necessary*. This is universally allow'd when its worship is *idolatrous* or *superstitious*, or it requires *unlawful* terms of communion; and therefore I shall insist no longer upon it, but only observe, that what is an idolatrous or superstitious worship, or what are *really* unlawful terms of communion, can't be determin'd by any *public* authority, but must



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must be left to the *private judgment* of every man's mind. And, consequently.

In the third place, none, who are truly *honest*, who are not sway'd by irregular passions, or vicious prejudices, but, upon a deliberate impartial inquiry, according to their capacity and advantages, think themselves oblig'd, in *conscience*, to dissent from their brethren; no such persons as these, I say, can possibly incur the guilt of *Schism*: For this would be to make *honesty itself* a crime; and at the same time that we suppose it a man's duty to act according to the light and directions of his conscience, to reproach and condemn him for it. Particular scruples may indeed be *groundless*, the judgment we form, and upon which we take the liberty to separate from others, may be *erroneous*; but are there no allowances to be made for the weakness and fallibility of human reason? Is not this every honest man's *misfortune*, rather than his *fault*? Will not the merciful governour of the world overlook it? And shall not we treat such a one with candour and humanity, notwithstanding his *involuntary* errors? — Or shall we run him down with reproach and infamy? — If men of real integrity may be schismatics purely for being mistaken, and having an over-strict and scrupulous conscience, schism must be perfectly *innocent*, because it always has been, and ever will be, in innumerable cases, *unavoidable*. Or if it be still insisted on that such differences are highly criminal, and displeasing to God, tho' they are not, at all, the matter of our *choice*, this will be to make guilt and misery necessary; which, if it was really a doctrine of Christianity, much be such a strong  
*intrinsic*

*intrinsic* mark of imposture, so absolutely contrary to all our notions of the wisdom, and justice, not to say the goodness of God, that no miracles, how *great* or *numerous* soever, would be sufficient to establish its authority.

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But is it not our duty to sacrifice a few scruples for the *peace* of the church? — Not one. — For if the peace of the church can't be secur'd without giving up conscience, honour, and integrity, it is better it be *disturbed*; better there were *no church at all*, than that the cause of true piety and virtue should suffer by it. Besides, how is this peace broken by the scrupulous dissent of an honest mind from establish'd opinions, and forms of worship, while he behaves *charitably*, and is content with enjoying his own liberty, without *insulting* and *censuring* others? Nothing, surely, can hinder, but the *church* may be at peace as well as the *state*, notwithstanding a variety of sentiments and manners, unless it be that the *imposing party*, who call themselves the church, are resolv'd there shall be no peace till all submit to their authority, and comply with their humours and prejudices; till they have brought about an uniformity in *trifles*, that have not the least relation to true Christianity; which is a *monstrous* attempt in itself, and, if ever it prevails, will probably banish religion and virtue out of the world, to make way for outward form and hypocrisy. I may add, that the *modesty* of such persons is very extraordinary, as well as their inclination to an harmony and union with their brethren, who can desire *them* to act against their consciences for the sake of peace, *i. e.* in other words, only to silence their own unreasonable clamours, who are

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determined



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determined to be satisfy'd on no softer terms; and yet refuse to abate a few *indifferent* ceremonies, (which are of no use in religion but to engender strife and variance, and which they have no pretence of *conscience* for keeping) to remove offence from honest minds, and thereby restore the public tranquillity. In all such differences as these, if there be really the guilt of schism, it will not fall on men of *scrupulous integrity*, who cannot, without forfeiting their virtue, comply with what is requir'd of them; but on the rigid *imposers* of human schemes, who by their stiffness cause the division, and all the rancour and animosity that attends it \*.

Nay, even tho' the terms of communion, with any particular church, are allow'd to be *lawful*, it does not from thence follow, that I am oblig'd to worship stately with it; but if I

\* It may be thought, perhaps, that, in some things, I have confounded heresy with schism, and schism with heresy. I think it proper therefore, just to observe, that tho' the two ideas are really distinct, so that a man may espouse the interests of a particular faction against true Christianity, without going so far as to renounce communion with other Christians, and therefore without being a *schismatic*; and on the contrary, may be the cause of very unnecessary, uncharitable, and fatal divisions in the church, and yet not act against conscience, nor, consequently, be, in the sense of St. Paul, an *heretic*; notwithstanding, I say, that these things may *possibly* happen, 'tis undeniable that both these crimes *frequently* meet in the same characters, and natural to expect that they will, *generally*, go together. And this I take to be a sufficient justification of what I have advanc'd, *viz.* that a *violent party spirit*, that puts men upon *excommunicating* and *unchristianing* the rest of the world, is the true nature and highest guilt of *schism*; and for the reasons alledged, under the last head of the foregoing discourse, one of the most *suspicious* marks of *heresy*.

think

think the constitution and manner of worship, in other churches, more *expedient* and *useful*, I am certainly at full liberty, as a *man*, and a *christian*, to join with them. My differing from the *majority* does not break the peace, if I act with moderation and candour; I do nothing but what I have a *right* to do, and am not answerable for *accidental* consequences; but the whole guilt of them must lye at their door, who take occasion, from an *innocent* circumstance, to foment a spirit of *faction* and *discord*. Not that I am against a *compliant* temper, in order to reconcile religious differences; but there is no reason that the compliance should be all on *one side*. We ought not to submit too *tamely*, for fear of establishing *arbitrary* power; and I can't but think that it may be of great use to stand up against unwarrantable incroachments and impositions, for the sake of the *common rights* of mankind, which are thereby invaded. But when those who separate become censorious and rigid, when they think of themselves as the only Christians, and confine their affection and esteem to persons of their own sentiments and party, tho' their *separation* might be justified, if they had conscience to plead, their *uncharitableness* makes them schismatics: So that as there are cases, in which only *one side* is guilty of schism, there are others in which *both* are chargeable with it, the imposers of human forms, and those who dissent from them; *viz.* when they condemn, reproach and uncharitably refuse communion with each other.

Upon the whole, would we avoid the guilt both of *heresy* and *schism*? — Let us be *honest* and *peaceable*. — In all the differences which we



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may have with our brethren, let us act with moderation, and maintain an humble, charitable, condescending temper. — Tho' they may require such things of us, as may hinder our joining with 'em in *their* communion, let us keep open *our own*; and be ready to receive *sincere* Christians of *every* denomination. — And when we have done all, that is in our power, to *preserve* or *restore* peace, we may patiently bear the abuses of *slandorous* tongues; and leave bigots, and the advocates for church-power and imposition, to the *tortures* of their own *narrow, gloomy,* and *restless* minds, and the *contempt* they will certainly meet with, from all the *rational, good natured,* and *ingenuous* part of mankind.



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## S E R M O N XIII.

Of the pleasures of a religious life.

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PROV. iii. 17.

*Her ways are ways of pleasantness; and all  
her paths are peace.*

**T**H E S E words are part of *Solomon's* description of the advantages of *wisdom*, or true religion, which, contrary to the general method of this book (compos'd for the most part of independent sentences) he pursues in a connected discourse. He begins the chapter with recommending a strict regard to the rules of virtue from this consideration, that 'tis the most likely way to secure *esteem* and *influence*, and a *long, happy, honourable* life: The same argument is resumed at the 13th verse; and the whole is wrought up with so much *beauty* and *elegance*, that I choose to give it in the language of the wise author himself, *Happy is the man that findeth wisdom, and the man that getteth understanding. For the merchandize of it is better than the merchandize of silver, and the gain thereof than fine gold. She is more precious than rubies; and all the things thou canst desire are not to be compared unto her.* Length

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*of days is in her right hand; and in her left hand riches and honour. Her ways are ways of pleasantness; and all her paths are peace.* I shall only add by way of introduction, that if the argument from *pleasure* appears to be on the side of religion, it may be hoped its efficacy will be *universal*; since a desire of happiness is an *inextinguishable* principle in human nature, and one of the most powerful motives, by which the bulk of mankind are determin'd. In my following discourse, I shall

- I. Premise a few things, very briefly, for explaining and illustrating the observation contained in the text. And then, which is the chief part of my design, proceed to show,
- II. The *peculiar excellency* of the pleasures of religion and virtue.

The *first* thing that I would premise is, that what is here said of the pleasures of religion supposes that persons are, in some degree, *inured* to the practice of it, and have a virtuous disposition and turn of mind: For without this there can be no more a taste of *divine* and *moral* pleasures, than of *animal* gratifications without the senses. Every pleasure must have its faculty of *perceiving*, suited and adapted to it. And therefore to those who have led a dissolute irregular life, the ways of religion are at first ungrateful and burthensome; because they not only oppose the current of the animal passions, but stubborn and inveterate habits; and so oblige them to offer, for some time at least, a kind of *violence* to nature. But when corrupt appetites are subdued, vitious prejudices

dices remov'd, and contrary principles fixed within us, then religion is *easy*, and the duties of it are *delightful*. And the pleasures of piety, as will hereafter be shewn, are beyond comparison the most excellent that human nature is capable of; suited to its dignity, worthy its exalted capacities, substantial and durable; so that when a man comes to practise it with *freedom*, he begins to enjoy himself, and his noble faculties in their right order, and lives in a manner agreeable to his high original, and the design of his creation. Nay, even the *controuling* licentious inclinations, as 'tis a *rational*, *generous*, and *manly* action, must of consequence, notwithstanding the trouble and mortification that attends it, afford much greater and more sublime Satisfaction to the mind, than any that can spring from an *indulgence* of them. Again,

2dly. In interpreting *Solomon's* observation we must except *extraordinary* cases; as we are oblig'd to do with respect to many other general propositions, which are only suppos'd to hold true in the common course of things. The case, for example, of *violent persecution*, an evil indeed, that, upon the whole, happens but seldom, and may be avoided in part, even when a spirit of oppression prevails, by a discreet and moderate behaviour; the case, I say, of *violent persecution* must be particularly excepted; which may, in a great measure, destroy the natural advantages resulting from the practice of virtue. However it can't be denied, that a very considerable pleasure will arise from acting a *brave* and *steady* part, and adhering inflexibly to our duty under the bitterest reproaches and sufferings; and the in-



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ward shame and uneasiness, which a man of a generous temper must feel, on a cowardly deserting the cause of truth and righteousness, may *equal*, and sometimes, perhaps, *exceed* the inconveniences that the good man labours under, and bears with a patient, firm, unshaken mind, in maintainance of his integrity.

Finally, we are to understand the words of the text, not as speaking of what is always *fact*, but of the direct and natural *tendency* of the thing. The pleasures of religion may be destroy'd by *dark* and *gloomy* notions of it, or by the influence of a *melancholy* habit: But when there is nothing in men's particular complexion, inclining to *spleen* and *dejectedness*, nothing in their scheme of religion, that leads to superstitious *rigiour* and *severity*, when its duties are rightly understood and carefully practis'd, the genuine effect of it is inward composure and satisfaction: *Her ways are ways of pleasantness, and all her paths are peace.* And, indeed, how can it be otherwise, when religion allows of all the innocent and desirable pleasures even of the *sensitive* kind, and by promoting the health of our bodies, and the chearfulness and serenity of our minds, *heightens* every other enjoyment; when 'tis nothing else but acting up to the *reason* and *truth* of things, an imitation of the moral perfections of God, and, consequently, the *rectitude*, and *supreme dignity* of human nature; and will therefore procure for us the acceptance and favour of our great creator, and a glorious and eternal reward. These necessary rules for understanding the text being premis'd, I proceed to show,

2dly,

2dly, The peculiar excellency of the pleasures of religion and virtue; that they are the highest mankind are capable of; have every thing in them that can recommend any pleasures to the pursuit of rational beings; and infinitely the advantage, in many respects, over all other enjoyments whatsoever. This I take to be the most necessary part of a discourse on this subject; and the only consideration that is likely to reclaim those, whose judgments are perverted and darkned by a long indulgence of irregular affections. Even such persons, who are unhappily enslaved to vice, will, I suppose, make no scruple of allowing, that there *may be* pleasures in a religious life, and the strict practice of virtue, where there is a *proper disposition* of mind to relish them; nay, moreover, that where this is the *particular turn*, they may afford a much more agreeable entertainment than any other pursuits of a different kind. But then they will be apt to plead, that men's pleasures are as various as their *inclinations* and *tempers*, and the *prevailing principles* by which they are influenced; and, of consequence, as they find in themselves a *contrary taste*, whether it be from nature, or custom, the happiness that is most *suitable* for them must lie quite another way; that they have no notion of any greater or more desirable pleasures, than what they *already* enjoy; and that it is unreasonable to expect they should give up those delights which they have always been *used* to, and know the *sweetness* and *value* of, for others which they never *experienc'd*, and perhaps shall never bring themselves thoroughly to *approve*; nay, which, for ought they know, may have no real foundation in na-

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ture, but spring entirely from a *particular warmth* of *enthusiasm*, that only a few are capable of.

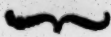
What method now must we take to convince such men of the weakness and sophistry of their reasonings, and that they miserably deceive and impose upon themselves? — Will it be sufficient to tell them barely, that there are pleasures in the practice of *religion* and *virtue*? — To this they will answer, that there are pleasures, likewise, in the pursuits of *ambition*, and *sensuality*. — The only way therefore that we can follow is to shew, that there is, in nature, a *difference* between the several pleasures, to which mankind are addicted, that their particular sentiments, prejudices, affections, and habits don't *destroy*, or in reality at all *lessen*, this *necessary difference*; and that the *superiority* on all accounts, whether it be in respect of *purity*, *solidity*, *duration*, and every other circumstance that can help to furnish out the most *complete* satisfaction, is on the side of the pleasures of the virtuous man. And this I shall attempt to do in the remaining part of my discourse; and hope, that tho' I must be oblig'd, by reducing this noble subject, which can hardly be exhausted, within so narrow a compass, to treat of it *partially* and *imperfectly*, sufficient hints may however be suggested, to recommend a religious life not only to the *graver* and more *considerate* part of this audience, but even to those, if there are any such, who are of a *gayer* turn, and have no esteem of any thing but as it contributes to their pleasures.

I might begin with this, that the pleasures of religion are *manly*, i. e. they are the exercise of our *noblest* faculties, and alone suited to the *distinguishing* capacities of human nature. Indeed it must be  
own'd,

own'd, that sensitive gratifications are agreeable to *one part* of our frame, in which there are strong appetites, planted by the all-wise creator himself, that demand such gratifications; and consequently, they may, within certain bounds, be *innocently* and *regularly* indulg'd. But are these the *peculiar* pleasures for which mankind were form'd, and indu'd with those excellent powers that advance them so eminently above the animal creation? No one can bring himself to assert, or even to imagine this, who has ever consider'd his own make and constitution. *Reason* and *reflection* are of very little use to us in sensual enjoyments; which are found perhaps in much greater strength and perfection, among the brutes, who have nothing of this *sublime, overruling directing* principle, but are led only by *instinct* and *appetite*. Nay, it is not a mere *possible* supposition, but highly *probable*, since these are the only enjoyments they are capable of; and, besides, this further reason may be given, from the wisdom and goodness of God, why mankind should not have so *exquisite* a taste of pleasures that depend on the bodily senses as inferior creatures, *viz.* lest their affections, which in the present state are apt to be most *impetuous* and *extravagant* this way, should be quite engaged and captivated by *lower* and *meaner* gratifications, to the neglect of much more *considerable*, even *intellectual* and *moral* pleasures. It appears then, that the indulgencies of sense are not the *peculiar* pleasures of a man, and have nothing at all to do with his *noblest*, his *distinguishing* faculties: They are not indeed, *unworthy* human nature in its state of *minority*; but may as properly be call'd *brutal*, as *manly* pleasures. On the contrary, the pleasures of which we are capable



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capable by means of our rational nature, are of an absolutely different kind: They are the pleasures of *piety, justice, gratitude, benevolence*, and a regular *self-government*: These therefore most *naturally* and *strictly* belong to us as men, and, of consequence, must be our *supreme* entertainment and delight. But perhaps it will have little influence, against strong prejudice and habit on the side of vice, to shew that the pleasures of religion are *manly*, and argue their *superior excellency* from thence; I shall therefore endeavour to prove, that they are, *in their own nature*, preferable to all other enjoyments. And,

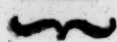
1<sup>st</sup>. The pleasures of virtue suppose all those *unruly passions* to be subdu'd, or, at least, controul'd and moderated, which are the cause of the greatest disorders and miseries in human life; all the *sensual passions* to be corrected, and kept within their just limits, that they may neither impair our health, corrupt and debase our minds, or injure our fellow creatures; all the disorderly motions of *pride* and *envy* suppress'd; and the violent transports of *anger* and *revenge* check'd and restrained; in short, every thing *calm* and *serene*, every affection and appetite obedient to the *still dictates* of reason, and, consequently, creating neither disturbance *within*, nor confusion *without*. The right government of the passions is an important and essential branch of virtue, and one of the chief pleasures that attend the practice of it: For besides the numberless vexations and inquietudes which it prevents, it is a sedate, uniform, *self-enjoyment*, that no affluence of *outward prosperity*, no splendor of *greatness*, no *starts* and *flashes* of pleasure, no *short liv'd extasies* can compensate for the want of: Thus  
compos'd

*compos'd* are the pleasures of religion. But can the same be said of any other pleasure? Far from it. To instance only in *sensual* indulgences; while a man is the most eager in the pursuit of them, he may pine away with envy, be toss'd and agitated by furious resentments, or rack'd with the torments of disappointed ambition: Nay, they won't so much as remove the uneasiness, arising from the particular appetites to which they are immediately adapted; but as, before enjoyment, they are *restless* and *violent*, by frequent gratification they become more *inflamed* and *insatiable*.

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2dly. It is another excellent property of the pleasures of religion and virtue, that they will bear the *strictest* review, and improve upon *reflection*. Let a man examine, ever so carefully, the pleasures he feels on having faithfully discharg'd his duty to God, and practis'd that reverence and submission, that love and gratitude, which are immutably due, from all rational beings, to the father of the universe, the eternal and inexhaustible fountain of good; the pleasures of impartial justice, and generous, diffusive benevolence; or those that spring from temperance and chastity, keeping all his passions under strict government, and denying himself every irregular gratification, however agreeable to his warmest and strongest inclinations: let him examine these pleasures (I say) ever so carefully, and they will all appear to be worthy his most excellent faculties, the *dignity* and *refinement* of his nature. He will find himself so constituted, that it is impossible for him to avoid being delighted with the review of such a regular, honourable, and amiable conduct; and there is nothing but a sense of his defects, and not having cultivated these virtues



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tues in a higher degree, that can give the least check to his inward satisfaction — Every *new reflection* is a *repetition* of the pleasure.

But the enjoyments of sense, if pursu'd with the utmost prudence and moderation, will be found to be, at best, but *innocent*. There is nothing in them that shews the *excellency* of our constitution, above that of the creatures below us; and consequently, it is not in their nature to yield that generous and sublime delight, that arises from exercises of piety and virtue. Nay there is, really, something *mortifying* that attends a just estimate and consideration of them; as they discover to us the *weakness* and *imperfection* of our present frame, and the *disorders* to which it is liable. For by means of that very *animal* composition, which renders us capable of enjoyments of this kind, we are subject to innumerable inconveniencies; not only to ungovern'd passions, and the fatal extravagancies that they continually produce, but to dejected spirits, confus'd and melancholy thoughts, sickness, pain, and all the evils of mortality. And if the indulgences of sense, even when they are most regular, yield so little comfort on a review, and are rather a *humbling* consideration, than a source of real satisfaction to the mind; in what a disagreeable light must the *excesses* of luxury and *vitious* pleasure appear, upon cool and impartial reflection? These, the natural consequences of which, where there is not a hardned insensible temper, are nothing but *confusion*, *shame* and *remorse*, can't bear a comparison with the rational pleasures of religion, which, the more they are *considered*, must be the more thoroughly *approved*. Religious pleasures are, of all others, the most *pure* and  
*unmixt*,

*unmixt*, not interrupted in the enjoyment with disquieting suspicions, nor succeeded by uneasy terrors: And this is one of their noblest and most recommending properties; a property that can never belong to any enjoyments, however, for the *moment* they last, *transporting*, however *applauded* and *admired*, that reason condemns. And nothing can more fully demonstrate the folly of such irregular indulgences than this, that it is absolutely impossible for any man to be happy, whose favourite gratifications leave a *sting* behind them, who is *ashamed* of his conduct, and at *variance* with himself.

3dly, The pleasures of religion depend entirely on *ourselves*, and not on those numberless accidents, which may either prevent, or blast, or entirely destroy all outward pleasures: — Not on the *senses* which may lose their quickness; — not on the *animal passions*, which may grow faint and languid; — not on the return of an *over-loaded* and *jaded* appetite; — not on mutual *agreement* and *confederacy*; — not on *critical* seasons, and *special* opportunities; — nor on the *jealousies*, *passions*, and *opposite interests* of our fellow creatures. These things have almost the sole influence in forming, and disposing of the pleasures of the *ambitious* and the *sensualist*; but those that spring from virtue are *free* and *independent*: Being seated in the mind, they may be enjoy'd in their greatest refinement when the body decays, and the edge of all its appetites is blunted. The malice and power of the most formidable oppressors, who may take from us all the outward accommodations of life, can't deprive us of them — They forsake us not even in *solitude*. — But if we were banish-  
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ed the society of all mankind, a consciousness of our integrity, while we convers'd in the world, and the reflection on the simplicity and rectitude of our manners, would furnish out a *great* and *noble* entertainment. And as the pleasures of a good life depend entirely on *ourselves*, it is in our power to be always *increasing* them by a greater proficiency in virtue; whereas those of sense are according to *fix'd* and *stated* laws of nature, by us unalterable. We may, indeed, animate and raise our *imagination*s, and promise ourselves, *before-hand*, extraordinary scenes of delight; but with all our art can do but little, if any thing at all to heighten the actual enjoyment.

Again, another very considerable recommendation of the pleasures of religion is, that they can never be pursu'd to an *excess*: — Never beyond the most deliberate dictates of reason; — never to bring a just reproach upon ourselves; — or to the injury of others. On the contrary, the more we are employ'd in these pleasures, and, consequently, in cultivating the solid principles of virtue, on which they are founded, the more shall we *ennoble* and *exalt* our nature, and be more *extensively* useful to mankind. But the *excesses* of other kinds of pleasure are daily *notorious*, and fill the world with the utmost confusion and misery. They impair *health*, consume the *substance*, bring infamy upon the *character*, introduce most deplorable distress into *families*, and violate the general peace and order of *human society*. Instead of *enlarging* the mind, and inspiring sentiments of generosity, their natural effect is to *enervate* and *soften* it, and render it unfit for all that is great and manly. In short, they are, in this particular,  
quite

quite the *reverse* of the pleasures of religion, that in every instance the greatest difficulty is, to prevent their being carried to an *excess*; For without great prudence, care, and resolution, they will infallibly be attended with most pernicious consequences, and hurry us on to very fatal extreams.

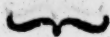
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5thly. Religious pleasures are our *best*, our *only* support, under the disappointments and calamities of life. There are *lesser* cares, which a person may possibly divert, at least in some degree, by a course of intemperance and luxury; by constantly inflaming his passions, and doing his utmost to keep reason asleep: But this is not so much the *patience* and *firmness* of a *man*, as the *stupidity* of a *brute*. And after all, as insensible as the sinner may appear to be in the midst of his affected gaiety, his mind may be *confus'd*, and an utter stranger to a *settled* chearfulness and peace: Or, however, there are some circumstances, in which all outward comforts must fail him, and leave him quite destitute of relief. Let us suppose, for instance, that he labours under decays of nature or is tormented with acute pains, or under the *immediate apprehensions* of death; in such a condition as this, when he is altogether incapable of any of those sensual gratifications, which he has always pursued as the sum of his felicity, will the remembrance of *past* pleasures refresh and bear up his spirits? Quite the contrary. They must appear, at best, to be *insignificant*, and *trifling*; and it is natural to expect, that a review of the guilty scene will *alarm*, and fill him with *horror*, and render his other miseries more heavy and insupportable.

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But the good man, who has acted as became him, and steadily adher'd to the rules of virtue and religion, has in all such *critical seasons* of distress, a solid and substantial support. The integrity of his heart will keep him from *sinking*. The perfect resignation of his mind to providence will prevent his being *ruffled* and *discompos'd*. Nay, his pleasures will not desert him in the very *last extremity* of nature; but a sense of his Maker's favour, and the prospect of an happy immortality, must needs *alleviate* the weight of every affliction he suffers, and enable him to bear up, under the wastings of a *shatter'd, tottering* constitution, with *resolution* and *constancy*. And, surely, nothing can be more desirable than to have relief from *within*, when all is dark and gloomy *without* us.

Finally, the pleasures of religion are of all others the most *durable*. We carry them always about with us, ready for use on every *emergency*. They are not enjoyed by starts, nor require, in order to their being relish'd, dull and tedious intervals of indolence, or *painful expectation*; but are a *constant* fund of delight. They never *sate*, never grow *flat* on frequent use; but rather more *strong, fresh, and lively*.

But do any of these excellent properties belong to the pleasures of the *Epicure*? Are they not *superficial* and *momentary*? Do they not end in *loss* of *appetite*, and a *stupid listlessness* at least, if not in confusion and remorse? Does not a too frequent repetition of them render them *heavy* and *unenter-taining*, and, sometimes, quite *nauseous*, till the spirits are recruited and the senses recover their former quickness? Will they not forsake us at death, and leave us intirely destitute of comfort in the

the eternal world? What then can be more wild and extravagant, than for a man to purchase them by debauching his *reason*, and forfeiting his *honour*, with the loss of his *innocence* and *peace*; and the pleasures of religion that will continue *for ever*, and be only *reviv'd*, *enlarg'd*, and *perfect'd*, in the future state?

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— Consider this, be wise, and shew yourselves men.— Give up the *base* and *unworthy* gratifications of vice and sensuality, for the *refin'd* and *god-like*, entertainments of virtue; for the *calmness* and *evenness* of an upright mind; and the *exalted* pleasure of doing good.— Exchange the satisfactions of a *brute* for the joys of *angels*.— Be ambitious to partake of the happiness of *God himself*.— This *reason*, and every principle of *generosity* strongly dictate: Nay, consult even your *self-love*, and that will direct to it. But if for the sake of irregular enjoyments, which are *short-liv'd*, *uncertain*, and *superficial*, you sacrifice the *noblest* and *purest* pleasures that human nature is capable of; your *folly* and *wickedness* must be both inexcusable.





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## S E R M O N XIV.

Religion founded on reason, and the  
right of private judgment.

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JOSH. xxiv. 15.

*And if it seem evil unto you to serve the  
L O R D, choose ye this day whom ye will  
serve, whether the Gods which your fa-  
thers served that were on the other side of  
the flood, or the Gods of the Amorites,  
in whose land ye dwell: But as for me,  
and my house, we will serve the L O R D.*

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**I**N the former part of this chapter, *Joshua*, having assembled the tribes of *Israel* together at *Shechem*, gives them a brief history of the astonishing acts of God in their favour, from his first appearance to *Abraham* to their settlement in the promised land. He recounts the call of *Abraham* from idolaters, to the acknowledgment and worship of the one true God, with a view to preserve, amongst his posterity, the grand principles of religion pure and uncorrupted; the unsettled condition of their great progenitor in the land of *Canaan*; the oppression of their ancestors in *Egypt*,  
and

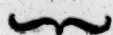
and miraculous deliverance from thence by the hands of *Moses* and *Aaron*, who were enabled to prove their commission by such awful credentials, as not only humbled the pride of the *Egyptian* king, and struck terror into all his people, but were the fullest evidence of the supreme universal dominion, and irresistible power of the God of *Israel*; and finally his wonderful conduct and support of them in the wilderness, his destroying the idolatrous nations that set themselves to oppose their passage, and fixing them, at length, in the possession of that good land, which he had promis'd to give them for an inheritance. And from this series of surprizing providences, *Joshua* argues, in the 14th verse, the obligations they were under to *fear the LORD*, to *serve him in sincerity and truth*, and renounce all the idolatry of their *fathers*. But because it was necessary that their religion should be free and voluntary, he refers the matter entirely to their own determination, upon a review of the reasons which he had offered, only declaring for himself and his family, that they would adhere to the acknowledgment and worship of the true God, whatever choice the rest of the people might make: *And if it seem evil unto you to serve the LORD, choose ye this day, whom ye will serve, whether the Gods whom your fathers served that were on the other side of the flood, or the Gods of the Amorites, in whose land ye dwell: but as for me, and my house, we will serve the LORD.*

'Tis remarkable, that in this passage *Joshua* takes it for granted, that if the *Israelites* revolted from the true God, they would fix in some form of religion or other; and not turn absolute *atheists*, and cast off all religion. And, indeed, the cha-



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acter of an Atheist would hardly be thought possible to happen amongst mankind, who are reasonable creatures, did it not appear in fact, that some have so darkned and defaced the reason of their minds, as to dispute *first* principles, to question even the existence of a Deity, and banter the obligations of religion and virtue. From whence we learn, that as human nature is capable of a vast enlargement of its faculties, and of attaining to high degrees of moral perfection and excellence, it may also be sunk into the lowest state of corruption and degeneracy. For the evidences of a supreme and sovereign intelligence, the creator and governour, of the world, appear plainly every where. Earth, sea, and air bear the strongest testimony to this fundamental truth: *The heavens likewise declare the glory of God, and the firmament sheweth his handy work.* By the existence of *effects*, we are necessarily led to the acknowledgment of an eternal *first cause*; and the giving being to such an infinite variety of creatures, the supporting and animating universal nature, the admirable order, and exquisite uses of the several parts of it, the preserving such an immense frame of things in constant and perfect harmony, making even the minutest parts subserve the beauty of the whole natural system, and the general good of the moral world; these, I say, are the clearest demonstrations of the *infinite wisdom* and *power* of the Deity. And from his infinite wisdom, which must inform him at all times what is fittest to be done, and his infinite power enabling him with ease to effect it, and consequently his consummate and immutable happiness, we may certainly infer his *moral perfection*; nay, that he is a being of *absolute*

*sol*ute and *ne*cessary moral perfection ; who can have no temptation to violate any of the eternal rules of righteousness, truth, and goodness, but will always pursue what is best upon the whole. And the duties, which *more immediately* relate to this supreme mind, naturally arise from the notion of his absolute perfection, and universal preserving and governing providence ; as do these of *justice* and *charity* from the circumstances, and necessities of mankind, and the relations in which they mutually stand to each other ; and the obligation to *temperance* and *self-government*, from its necessary subserviency to the above-mentioned great and indispensable duties, and to the rectitude of our rational nature.

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What can we think of the man then, who denies and reviles these plainest dictates of reason? — Who believes that a world, the parts of which are in a continual *flux*, and undergo innumerable *changes*, is a *self-existent* and *necessary* system ; — Or that a world, which has in its frame and structure characters of the highest *wisdom*, and most curious *design*, was formed by *chance* — or that it can preserve itself, and is independent on him that made it ; — that mankind, who are *reasonable* and *free* beings, and consequently *moral* and *accountable* agents, are bound by no *law*, and have no inspector and judge of their conduct ; — that he who endued them with moral powers will take no cognizance whether they are *improved*, or *neglected* and *abused* ; — and that virtue and vice are mere *empty names* ; — What, I say, can we think of the man who maintains such gross absurdities, in opposition to the plain nature of things, and the almost unanimous sense of his fellow-creatures,



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tures, but that he is an *irregularity*, a sort of *monster* in the human species, (whose distinguishing excellency it is that they are rational) and as such not fit even to be *supposed* to exist, till apparent and undeniable fact declares it? I proceed now to propose some other useful observations from the text, as the subject of my following discourse. And,

I. I observe that religion is a *voluntary* thing, and a matter of *choice*. Accordingly we find, that *Joshua* left it to the *Israelites*, if it seem'd *evil* to them to *serve the LORD*, to *choose*, for themselves, *whom* they would *serve*; in which he acted as one who had a just knowledge of human nature. For mankind are beings endued with *reason* and *liberty*; and *this alone* makes them capable of religion and virtue. Without these powers they would be upon a level with brute creatures, and 'tis the *right* or *wrong* exercise of them that constitutes the *moral good*, or *evil* of actions; as will appear from the following considerations.

A man may have a good *natural disposition* to justice, beneficence, a sober and orderly behaviour, to meekness, peaceableness, and the like; but tho' these are important branches of a religious conduct, the *natural disposition itself* is not religion, but the *preferring* it to the *contrary* temper, and *cultivating* and *improving* it by those helps and motives which religion affords for that purpose; any more than a *natural tendency* to peevishness and sudden passion is vicious and sinful. The one is a misfortune like a *bodily defect*, or a *sickly constitution*, but can't be deem'd a proper fault, because 'tis *unavoidable* and *necessary*; and for the same reason the other, which, so far as it springs entirely

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ly from nature, is equally necessary, cannot be virtuous, or, in a *strict* sense, rewardable.

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Again, what just foundation for praise is there in a man's being of the *true* religion, a *Christian* suppose, by *chance*? without knowing the grounds of his religion, or the reason of his hope? merely because his *ancestors* were Christians, and Christianity is the *establisb'd* religion? *i. e.* upon the same foot as he might have been of a *false* religion, a *Mahometan*, or an *Idolater*. Such a man's faith, tho' by a *fortunate accident* of the most excellent kind, is no more a virtue than a good *natural complexion*, or the happy *situation and temperature* of the country where he was born. Indeed the truths, which he was thus *born* to the knowledge of, may be of great use to him, as they may be the foundation of a more perfect morality than they can be expected to arrive at, who are destitute of such advantages, whose lot is cast in the more dark and uncultivated parts of the World; but the *faith*, from whence these better morals proceed, has, considered in itself, no more real merit in it than the *ignorance* of an uninstructed infidel. Whereas not only the *morality*, but the *faith* of one, who is of the true religion from conviction and choice, is virtuous and commendable, because it is acquired by the exercise and improvement of his rational faculties; and on the contrary the *errors* which such a person may fall into, after proper care to avoid them, and sincere endeavours, in the use of all the necessary means, to come to the knowledge of the truth, will not be of any great *consequence* in themselves, nor *dangerous* to his happiness. So that, in many cases, 'tis better to *err* with an honest, unbiass'd, inquisitive mind



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mind (for this is oftentimes the natural effect of human infirmity, where there is the *best* temper, and a true *rectitude* of the will and affections) than to be in the *right* from custom, and an implicit reverence for tradition and authority; especially, if with a sound and orthodox faith, there be join'd a narrow disposition, neglect of free and rational enquiry, pride, prejudice, and censoriousness, which are the direct and immediate sources of *error*, but can be of no possible service to the cause of *truth*.

But farther, that our religion is only so far praise-worthy, as it is the matter of our *choice*, is evident from hence; that a man may perform an action that is in itself *good*, for example, an act of *beneficence*, and yet if he does not choose to do it as a *kind*, *beneficent* action, but from some other motives in which *religion* and *virtue* are not concern'd, it will not be a *virtuous* action; nay, it may be done from such principles, and to answer such purposes, as are evil and sinful, and then, taken in *all its circumstances*, it will be a *wicked* action; and the more so, because it is abusing an action that is good in itself to serve so vile an end. On the contrary, if a sincerely religious man does an action which is in itself *evil* with a good design, and especially, if through *mistake* he thinks it his duty, the honest intention may be perhaps in some degree his excuse; but how far it may be pleaded must be left to the decision of the supreme and righteous judge of the World, who alone knows what *negligence* or criminal *prejudice* was the occasion of the erroneous judgment of his mind, and consequently, how far his present ill conduct, tho' pursu'd

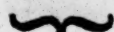
pursu'd with *upright* views, is owing to a preceding *wrong choice*. And, SERM.  
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Since it so plainly appears that religion, as it is the means of procuring for us acceptance with God, must be a *voluntary* thing, it necessarily follows that every man has an undoubted right to *judge for himself*, what form or method of religion is most rational, and agreeable to the divine will. For how can his religion be the result of his *free choice*, if he be not allow'd to *choose* for himself *at all*, in matters of religion; nay if it be not left absolutely to his own determination? *Restrain* this liberty, and you *destroy* it. There is no doing the matter by *halves*; but a man must either judge *entirely* for himself, or *another* must judge entirely for him: There is no *medium*. The former of these is the true state of the case, as has been already shewn; and it is evident farther from this consideration, that every man is, in his own frame and constitution, a *moral* agent, and an *accountable* being, and consequently must be left to think and act, as his own *private judgment* directs. His choice must be *uncontroul'd*; and no power upon earth has a right to compel him even to a profession of the *true* religion.

Whether the civil magistrate has a right to punish *Atheists*, and such as deny the obligations of all religion, natural and reveal'd, as long as they behave like good subjects, and peaceable and useful members of society, may be justly questioned: This enquiry, however, is not to our present purpose, my business at this time being only to prove, that he ought to leave every man to the quiet profession of that religion, which his own judgment and conscience approve, and not  
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to use *forcible* methods to bring any to the acknowledgment of the *establish'd* religion. And if what I am now arguing against be a part of the authority of the chief magistrate as *such*, it must belong to the supreme power of all nations *equally*; and consequently it must be the office of the magistrate to propagate, by force, *beaten idolatry* in heathen countries, the *Mahometan superstition* in *Mahometan* countries, as well as *Christianity* in *Christian* countries; *i. e.* since this power essentially belongs to his office, it must be his duty to establish by violence both the *true*, and *false* religions; or, in other words, to do things which are *contradictory*, and *repugnant* to each other. To say that he has only authority to compel men to embrace the true religion, will make no real difference in the case; for if we will not entirely destroy his *coercive jurisdiction*, that can be nothing else than what the civil magistrate, in every particular country, *thinks* to be *true*. And where there are several powers, all *equal* and *independent*, who claim to be the patrons and defenders of the *true* religion, which, in fact, deserves that character can only be determin'd either by a serious free and impartial examination of the *pretensions* of *each* (a thing not to be expected in the present case, since it is this very liberty that is suppos'd to be *restrain'd*) or by an *immediate revelation* from heaven.

Again, the use of force can be of no service to true religion, because it cannot convince the judgment nor consequently make *real converts* to it; but has a tendency to encrease *fraud* and *hypocrisy*, which is utterly inconsistent with religion. Such a method is likewise highly dishonourable

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to truth, as it puts it upon the same foot with *falsehood* and *imposture*. And.

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Finally, the office of the magistrate is to defend the properties and civil immunities of the subject, and to secure and promote the public good; and therefore he must be bound to restrain and punish those vices, which are a violation of mens natural rights, destructive of the order and happiness of society, and tending to public confusion and ruin. But what business can he have to meddle *beyond* this? Or to enquire into the speculative *opinions* of those who behave in an honest inoffensive manner, and contribute their part to the general good? Into opinions that are not *detrimental* to the peace of the community? For 'tis the *ungovern'd passion*, the *bitterness* and *contention* which attend religious controversies, that do all the mischief, and not *mere difference* of opinion. And I am persuaded, had the civil power interested itself less in mens *religious* enquiries and disputes, the world would have been much more *peaceable* than it has been; and we should not have had so many *unintelligible*, *absurd* and *extravagant* doctrines claiming to be parts of true religion, nor consequently so much *infidelity*; nor, I believe, so great a variety of sentiments as have abounded, especially in the Christian world. For a rational and free inquiry is much more likely to produce *uniformity* of opinion amongst sober and considerate men, than imposition and violence. So that upon these accounts it appears, that religion, which is a *personal* thing, and entirely a *voluntary* obligation, ought to be left *free* to every man's reason; and that the civil magistrate, instead of *restraining* the



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the liberty of private judgment, is bound to *protect* all his subjects in it, as much as in any other of their *natural rights*, against all encroachments whatsoever.

Let me add, before I conclude this head, that as it follows, from religion's being a matter of *choice*, that every man has a right to judge for himself which is the *true* religion, and the most acceptable method of serving God; so likewise, that he ought to use all those means, which the providence of God hath put in his power, in order to make a *right* choice. For *choice*, or giving the *preference*, supposes that that which is the object of it is the *best* of the kind; but how can men judge what religion is best, or consequently make a *rational* and *deliberate* choice of it, if they are not *impartial* and *diligent* in their enquiries? Of this I shall have occasion to say something more under the next observation; to which I now proceed.

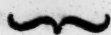
2dly, We may infer from the text, that no man can be obliged to embrace a religion that is *evil*, i. e. contrary to reason, and the moral fitness of things; but, on the contrary, is bound to reject it. *If, says Joshua to the Israelites, it seem evil unto you to serve the LORD, choose ye this day whom ye will serve;* by which he plainly intimated, that if the religion, which the God of *Israel* enjoin'd, had been really *evil*, i. e. unfit, and unreasonable; it would not only have been *lawful*, but their *duty*, to have look'd out for some better scheme. And indeed the thing is so clear in itself, that I need not say much to illustrate and confirm it. I shall do it therefore, briefly, by an instance or two.

If

If any scheme of religion undermines the perfections of God, which the reason of our minds can demonstrate from certain principles, it cannot be *true*. For example, if it represents him as an *arbitrary* being, who acts without regard to the reason of things, not only in the distributions of his bounty, but in his government of moral agents; as an *unjust tyrannical* being, who has clogg'd the happiness of mankind with insuperable difficulties, and made it depend either upon their *believing* or *doing* impossibilities; or as an *angry revengeful* being, who delights in cruelty, and in the misery and destruction of his creatures. And the same may be said of any other descriptions of the Deity that derogate from his *absolute perfection*, which is the necessary foundation of all true religion. Again, that scheme of religion must necessarily be *false*, and ought to be rejected with *detestation*, which *dissolves* or *weakens* the obligations to universal purity, and tends to licentiousness and vice; which indulges to sensuality, censoriousness, revenge, and encourages violence, persecution, &c. because virtue is of eternal and unchangeable obligation, and the above-mention'd and all other vices are unsuitable to human nature, and the established order of things; and finally, such an evil scheme ought to be abhorr'd, because it is destructive of the moral rectitude and happiness of mankind, which it must be the design of all true religion to support and advance, and in which the perfections of the Deity are most gloriously display'd: And the allowing that it is mens duty to reject any pretended revelation, that contradicts the principles of natural religion and morality, can be no prejudice to



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to the cause of *Christianity*, nor hinder its being acknowledg'd and reverenc'd by considerate and impartial minds: If it could, I own that this would be an *insuperable objection* against the Christian institution. But its doctrines are perfectly consistent and rational, and its precepts most wise, just, and good: It gives us the noblest ideas of God, recommends the most strict and universal virtue, and enforces the practice of it by the worthiest and strongest motives; and is excellently adapted to promote private perfection and happiness, and the order, peace, and well being of societies: It will therefore stand the test of the exactest judgment, and bear the most *severe* and critical, provided it be likewise an *honest* and *impartial* examination: Nay, the more thoroughly it is consider'd and enquir'd into by the light of uncorrupted reason, the more its morals are compar'd with the most perfect systems of *philosophy*, or with the morals of other *real*, or *pretended* revelations; the more will it shine and be distinguish'd for its excellence, as an institution of all others most perfective of true goodness, most worthy of God, and useful to mankind.

It can't be thought after this, that, by what has been said, I intend to insinuate that all religions are *equal*, and that 'tis indifferent whether a man chooses the true religion or a *false* one: For our sentiments of things, or giving the preference to one thing above another, will not alter their *real nature*. Truth will still be truth, and falsehood falsehood, whatever mens judgments and determinations are, The true religion will be worthy to be *receiv'd*, tho' it should happen to be *universally rejected*; and an evil scheme of religion

to be *rejected*, tho' it should be *universally received*. And tho' religion must be a *voluntary* thing, and a matter of *choice*; it is however our duty, in order to the making this choice, to be *diligent* and *impartial* in our enquiries. For the great author of our nature hath endued it with such faculties, as are *proper* to distinguish betwixt truth and error, and appear to have been given us for this very purpose. There is also a fix'd and certain *standard* of truth in the reason of things, which, in all cases of importance, and necessary influence upon our happiness, is sufficiently clear and explicit to *well dispos'd* minds. If therefore we indulge to a lazy indolence, and suffer our *judgment*, and consequently our *choice*, thro' prejudice and vicious affections to be abused and perverted, we are justly liable to blame and punishment. And again, tho' we may with safety reject a religion that is unreasonable, that patronizes vice, and is dishonourable to Almighty God; yet it must be allow'd, that in order to our being able to judge whether it deserves that character or no, we must *carefully* and *calmly* examine it: And, consequently, if for want of due enquiry, occasion'd by a prejudice in favour of our vices, by a regard to worldly interest, or by any other evil principle, we reject the true religion under the notion of falsehood, our *believing* that we *may* and *ought* thus to reject it will not excuse us. For so far as our not knowing our duty is *voluntary*, and springs from the *non-improvement* of those capacities and advantages for better information, which God, in his providence, has conferr'd upon us; so far as it arises from the want of an *honest unprejudiced* mind, and of exercising

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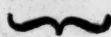


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that *care* and *diligence* in our enquiries, which may justly be expected from *rational* and *moral* agents; so far as our not seeing what it *becomes* us to see is not owing to a *weak* and *insufficient* light, but to *listlessness* and *indifference*, and the influence of *ungovern'd appetites*; we are, in the sight of God chargeable with *wickedness* and *insincerity*, and, consequently, liable to the effects of his displeasure.

3dly, We should learn, from *Joshua's* example, to be faithful to the cause of God, and the interest of religion and virtue, even in times of most *general* corruption and depravity. He bravely resolv'd to adhere to the worship of the true God, tho' the whole body of the *Israelites* should revolt to idolatry; *as for me and my house, we will serve the LORD.* And the same ought to be the conduct of every reasonable man, *viz.* *inflexibly* to pursue what he is convinc'd to be his duty, whatever the practice of *others* may be, and whatever they may *think*, or say of him. Singularity, in things indifferent, may generally perhaps be an argument of *weakness* and *folly*, or of unbecoming *stiffness* and *obstinacy*; but men have carried the argument much too far, when they have paid so great a compliment to *custom*, as to urge it against the practice of *virtue itself*. For the obligations of virtue are upon no considerations whatsoever to be dispens'd with, much less for a piece of *foolish fawning complaisance*; and a man of reason would never consent to do a thing that was *really* dishonourable, for the sake of avoiding *undeserv'd* reproach.

Indeed if virtue and vice were merely *arbitrary* and had no difference in the nature of things,  
'twould



'twould be unreasonable to be *singular* in what is now call'd virtue, when what is called vice came in *fashion*, and had the *character* and *reputation* of virtue: Nay farther, one would comply in things *lawful*, with the general prevailing humour of mankind, rather than look *odd* and *particular*, tho' it was somewhat contrary to one's own inclination. But what man in his senses would consent to corrupt and dishonour his nature, and make himself miserable, only because others did the like? Is a mortal distemper the less cautiously avoided because 'tis *epidemical*? Are not the obligations we are under to the great author of our being, to the law of our reasonable nature, and to preserve our integrity, of the *first* importance? Does not the *rectitude* and *happiness* of the moral world necessarily depend upon fulfilling those obligations? And is it not then our wisdom to be inflexible in this cause, tho' all men should *desert* and *reproach* us? Or shall we sacrifice this, which is the highest interest of human nature, to the passions, prejudices, and wickedness of an *unthinking*, *deluded*, and *degenerate* world?

Again, to dare to be *singularly good* is an argument of great resolution and strength of mind, and of a confirm'd and establish'd virtue: For such must that virtue be, which repels the contagion of *ill examples*, and flags not at *reproaches* and *ill treatment*. And I doubt not but such a character appears *brave* and *heroic* in the history of *Joshua*, or of any other persons in *former* ages, even to those, who, in very corrupt times are induc'd by the force of custom, or to justify their own practice, to censure and exclaim against it as precise and enthusiastical: which shews,



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that their objection is not so much against the *thing itself*, as against the *odium* and *scandal* that may attend it. But surely we may be sufficiently fortified in this respect, by considering, that while we thus conduct ourselves, we act suitably to the dignity of our reasonable frame, and conform to the example of the supreme being, whose goodness is *constant* and *invariable*; and that such a *steady integrity* will render us approv'd of by this most excellent being, and be recompens'd, hereafter, with everlasting honour and happiness.

I shall conclude all with observing, that the design of *Joshua*, to use his utmost credit and influence with his more *immediate dependants*, for the support and maintenance of *religion*, was truly *noble* and *generous*; and what it will be highly for the *honour* of every one of us to imitate. For it won't bear a serious dispute, which is the most *amiable* character, which the most *useful* member of society, which the *best* parent, and head of a family; he that endeavours to instruct those under his care in *just* and *worthy* notions of God, and leads 'em on to virtue by an *exemplary* behaviour; or another, with the same natural accomplishments, or acquir'd excellencies, and of the same rank and situation in the world, who leaves his children and servants to the *full swing* of their licentious appetites, is not at all concern'd about cultivating and improving in their minds sentiments of *piety*, and regard to *good morals*, or, which is much worse, first *debauches*, and then *hardens* them in wickedness, by his own *irregular* life.

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## S E R M O N XV.

The evidence of a future state, on the principles of reason and revelation, distinctly considered.

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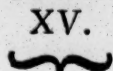
2 TIM. i. 10.

—*Who hath abolished death, and hath brought life and immortality to light through the gospel.*

I T is observable in almost all controversies, whether of greater or lesser importance, that both sides are apt to run into extremes, in the heat of their opposition to each other. Men are seldom inclin'd to consider the principles of their adversaries as of a *mixt* nature, partly right and partly wrong (which yet is very often the case) but seem rather to think, that they ought to keep at the greatest *distance* from them that is possible, and that all *concessions* are dishonourable, and a betraying the cause of truth. I might illustrate this by a variety of instances, but it will be more to my present purpose to confine myself to one of the most considerable, and that is, the

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grand dispute about the powers of *reason*, and the advantages and uses of *revelation*.

On the one hand reason is magnify'd as a plain, distinct, and sufficient rule in *all* circumstances; and a particular external revelation, to fix and explain the principles and obligations of morality, is represented as absolutely *needless*, and, consequently, unbecoming the infinite wisdom of God, who can do nothing *in vain*. On the other, revelation is not only describ'd as expedient and useful in *certain* circumstances, but strictly *necessary*; and reason as a blind erroneous guide, that is incapable *in itself* to direct mankind to the true knowledge of God, or give them just notions of their duty and happiness. Again, the advocates for the *strength* and *perfection* of natural reason are apt to talk of it, not only as affording clear and strong evidence of a future state of rewards and punishments *in general*, but even of a state of *immortality*; and that, therefore, we have very little, if any, advantage from *revelation*, with respect to this great and important article, beyond what we may receive from that *original light*, which is implanted in every man's mind. On the contrary, some defenders of revelation imagine, that nothing of this can be allow'd without diminishing its authority and excellence; and that reason is not only dark and confus'd with respect to the soul's *immortality*, but gives no probability of *any future state*. Both these, in my judgment, carry the matter *beyond* the truth; and would, perhaps, have fix'd in some *middle* opinion, if their thoughts had been intirely *disinterested*, and they had not had in view the maintaining and supporting a *particular scheme*. For let reason be,

in itself, and if *rightly exercised*, ever so sufficient to instruct mankind in religion and good morals, a revelation will be nevertheless desirable and beneficial, when it is actually *corrupted* and *darkened*, and the world is over-run with ignorance and superstition. In like manner, it can be of no possible disservice to the cause of Christianity, to suppose that *reason* might have discover'd a future state, any more than to allow that it has reviv'd the knowledge of other *natural* truths, which tho' founded in reason, and capable of being known by it, were, however, in a great measure *obliterated* and *lost*. Besides it is generally thought, in most other cases, to be one of the chief excellencies of revelation, that its most essential and important doctrines are agreeable to what the *light of reason itself* teaches. And shall the *same* thing be deem'd a disparagement to it in this particular instance? Let the belief of a future state be a dictate of *nature*, revelation will be still highly serviceable to mankind, by removing all *uncertainty* and *confusion* in their reasonings about it, and rectifying *weak* and *superstitious* notions, dishonourable to God, and hurtful to solid virtue; by greatly increasing, and adding to the probability of a *future existence in general*, and giving particular assurances of a happy *immortality*, which to reason is obscure and doubtful at best, if at all probable. I shall only add, that by denying there is any foundation in reason for the belief of a future state, we take away, from those who disown revelation, one of the strongest motives to a virtuous practice; which is, indeed no direct proof that the principle itself is *wrong*, but may justly incline us to *suspect* it; or, at



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least, should make us proceed with *deliberation* and *caution*, before we venture to determine in a matter of so great consequence, and not suffer us to be *hasty* in forming a conclusion, that may be dangerous to religion, and the happiness of the world. To set this matter in a clear and full light, I shall do these two things.

I. Consider what evidence *natural reason* affords of a future state. And,

II. Shew the great advantage we receive from *Christianity*, with respect to this important principle; by which it will appear, that notwithstanding the discoveries which reason may make, and the intimations we find of it in the writings of the *Old Testament*, it is reveal'd in a so much *plainer* and *stronger* manner, that it may, with great propriety, be said to be *brought to light through the Gospel*.

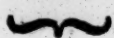
I. I am to consider what kind of evidences there are of a future state from *reason*. And, in general, we can pretend to nothing more than *probability*; and when this is all that the nature of the case will admit of, everythinking man will be determin'd by it in *religion* as well as in the *common affairs* of life; and it must be unreasonable, to the last degree to insist on *demonstration* and *strict certainty*. The next point to be settled is, what must pass for *probability*; which is the more necessary to be considered, because men's not fixing the true nature of it, and blending proofs of a different kind, partly *probable* and partly *demonstrative*, even where *demonstration* can't justly be expected, seems to have occasion'd all the obscurity and confusion in their speculations on this subject.

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The chief ground of all our arguings for a future state are the *moral* perfections of God; and these are generally suppos'd to be *certain* principles, that reason can demonstrate. Now if this be allow'd, I am not at all oblig'd, when I am only forming a *probable* conclusion, to shew that any particular principle is *necessarily inferr'd* from these perfections, because then it will not be barely *probable*, but *certainly true*; nor that the contrary is *absolutely inconsistent* with them, for if so, it will not be *probably*, but *certainly false*. All that I am concern'd to prove is, that what I maintain is *most agreeable* to the ideas of the divine wisdom and goodness; and this must be allow'd to be *probable* evidence, tho' I can't reduce the other opinion to a *direct absurdity*, or else *probability* will be the same with *demonstration*. Again, in our reasonings about probability, we must judge upon what *appears* to us, and not suspend our belief because we don't know *all the circumstances* of things, or *all the ends* that an infinitely perfect being may have in view. For *probabilities* subsist in their full force, and will influence the conduct of every wise and considerate man, notwithstanding *possibilities* to the contrary. And there must be allow'd to be a great probability in the argument before us, if the notion of a future state be shewn to be most agreeable to the *constitution* of man, to the *moral attributes* of God his supreme governor, and the *present condition* and *circumstances* of human nature. This I shall briefly examine. And,

1<sup>st</sup>. If we consider the nature of mankind, we shall find that they are *reasonable* beings, capable of discerning the difference between good and evil, of understanding that particular law, whatever it be,



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be, by which they are to be govern'd, and the weight and importance of the several motives which urge to the observation of it; that they are likewise *voluntary* agents, who are neither by their internal frame, nor by any foreign influence, necessarily determined to virtue or vice; and consequently *moral* and *accountable*, capable of being govern'd by laws, and rewarded or punish'd for their behaviour.

The next thing to be consider'd then is, whether God, their supreme governor, has actually given them *a law*, by which to direct and regulate their conduct. And, in general, it is highly probable that there must be some law of *intelligent* natures, as there are in the *animal* and *material* World: For doubtless the great creator design'd them for some *end*, as he did, evidently, the various systems of insensible matter; otherwise, the most perfect parts of the creation are the most useless and insignificant. Now no creature can answer an *end* but by *means* adapted to it, which are the *law* of its nature. So that some *peculiar laws* are as necessary to be suppos'd for *rational self-determining* beings, as the *laws of motion* in the *material* world: And the difference only lies here, that whereas matter is govern'd by *necessary* laws, and *necessarily* determin'd to its effects; rational and free beings are capable of directing their own conduct, either in *conformity*, or *opposition*, to the law of their nature; which (as I observ'd before) renders them *accountable* for their behaviour, and proper subjects of *reward* or *punishment*.

The general law which men are under is in short this, to do whatever is suitable to their *intelligent nature*, agreeable to the *relations* in which they are plac'd,

plac'd, and to their *rank* and *station* in the world, and what will best answer the *end* of their being, so far as it respects *themselves*, or *the whole community of mankind* of which they are members; and, consequently, to subject all the inferior appetites and passions to the conduct of reason, which is the *noblest* and most *perfect* principle, to do nothing but what *becomes* the *dignity* of their frame, nothing that will *dishonour* and *debase* it, to practise *reverence*, *love*, *submission*, and *gratitude* to God, and imitate his moral character by the exercise of *justice*, *meekness*, *peaceableness*, *universal benevolence*, *fidelity*, and all other *social* virtues, on which the order and happiness of the world depends: And this I call a law which God has given to mankind, because whatever appears to be *a rule*, arising from the establish'd constitution of things, with reference to the actions of the creature, can be no other than *a law* in the design of the creator. Let us now proceed to inquire in the

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2d place, Whether it be not most reasonable to suppose, that God, as the *wise* governor of mankind, will reward or punish their behaviour, in obeying or disobeying the law of their trial. And, in general, to imagine that he takes *no notice* of the conduct of his creatures, and is determin'd to make *no difference* at all between the virtuous and the vicious, represents him as having but little regard to the *order* and *harmony*, or even to the *happiness* of the rational world; and seems very *unsuitable* to his wisdom and goodness, in the character both of their *father* and *governor*: And if he makes *any* difference, which all our notions of him lead us to expect, the same reasons must induce him to do it in *every* instance. For if it be not fit to reward  
virtue



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virtue and punish vice in *particulars*, and consequently, proportionably, in *every particular*, it can hardly be a point of wisdom and goodness upon *the whole*. And from hence it undeniably follows, that no virtuous man can, upon the whole, have *less happiness* than one that is vicious; for in this case, virtue would, in effect, be *punish'd*, and vice *rewarded*.

But to give this argument its full strength, it may be proper briefly to state the *true foundation* of the divine rewards and punishments. The rewards, bestowed by the great Creator on his creatures, are not the result of any proper *merit* in them; nor his punishments the effect of *passion* in himself. Punishments I therefore suppose to have, chiefly, a *medicinal* design, in order to correct the disorders of mankind, and to have their foundation in the *wisdom* of the great governor of the world, because they are proper to check the growth of vice, and maintain the authority of the divine laws and government; and rewards to be founded in his *wisdom* and *infinite benevolence* towards his creatures, which inclines him to communicate happiness to all, who are *rightly dispos'd* and qualify'd for it. The sum of the argument then will stand thus. The design of God, in all his dealings with men, is to promote their *happiness*. He has given them laws, the observation of which has not only a *certain* tendency to their happiness, but is *necessary* in order to it. — It is therefore reasonable to be suppos'd, that he will take the most effectual methods to secure the *general purpose* he has in view, which is the *good* of his creatures. — This can't be obtained without a *conformity* to the laws which he has given them. — These laws will  
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not *probably* be obey'd, unless they are inforc'd by the sanction of *suitable rewards* and *punishments*. S E R M.  
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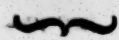
— And therefore the wisdom of his government seems to require that he should make use of these, since they are the *most proper* means to answer his end. So that *rewards* and *punishments* appear to have the same reason and foundation with *government itself*, viz. to prevent that *moral evil*, which all good laws are design'd to restrain, and which is directly *opposite* to, and *inconsistent* with the supreme happiness of mankind. To this let me add, that in order to serve these wise purposes, the rewards and punishments must be such, as, it may reasonably be expected, will *support* virtue in the present imperfect and corrupt state of human nature, and *counterballance*, in some proportion, the influence of animal passions, and the weight of worldly temptations. The only point therefore that remains to be determin'd is,

3dly, Whether all this, which, it has been shewn, may justly be expected from the wise governor of the world, is actually done *in the present life*. And the contrary is in a manner self-evident, and scarce needs illustration. For not to mention what is obvious to the common sense of mankind, that there are, and have been in all ages, multitudes of *virtuous* persons, who have enjoy'd less happiness in this life than *the most vicious*, whose wickedness has not only depriv'd their own minds, but been extremely injurious to the order and peace of society (which if there be a foundation for the rewards and punishments at all, as has been already prov'd, ought not to happen in any one instance) not to insist longer on this I say, if we take the present state of the world as it is upon *the whole*,  
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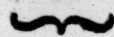
it has not *one mark* of a state of equal and impartial *retribution*, but every thing that might fairly be expected in a state of *trial*.

For here good and evil are *indifferently* dispens'd; and there is *one event* to the just and the unjust, without any *particular*, or, at least, *frequent* interposition, to vindicate the righteous man's cause, or punish his wicked oppressor. Men of *distinguish'd vice* are high in honour, and possess the largest affluence of worldly riches and grandeur, and attain it, oftentimes, by *treachery*, *oppression*, *perjury*, and other *base* and *unrighteous* methods; while persons of *singular* and *unblemish'd* virtue are loaded with a heavy weight of cares, and abandon'd to poverty and contempt. Nay they are sometimes despis'd, robb'd of the esteem of their fellow creatures, depriv'd of the necessities and conveniencies of life, abus'd and persecuted, even for their *goodness*. — And do these righteous men seem to have receiv'd their *reward*? — That reward which is reserv'd for them by a God of *infinite benevolence* and *mercy*. — Or that reward, which the *allwise* governor of the world is determin'd to confer, for the *encouragement* and *support* of virtue? — On the contrary, can we suppose the affluence of prosperity, the height of honour, the ease and plenty which the wicked enjoy, are design'd as *penal evils*, to deter others from the practice of vice? — Can that be call'd a state of *reward* for virtuous men, which they groan under as an incumbrance, and from which they earnestly desire to be enlarg'd into a more free and active life? — Or can it be deem'd a *proper punishment* for those, who have no notion of happiness above it,

it, and therefore center all their hopes and desires in it? S E R M.  
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If it be said, that there is a sufficient distinction made between good and bad men, by the *natural good and evil consequences* of virtue and vice: I answer, that, in innumerable cases, these natural consequences are *obstructed*, or *evaded*, and in these there is properly *no reward or punishment at all*: In others they are far from being *equivalent* to the outward advantages the sinner enjoys, or the accidental disadvantages the good man labours under; and in all such instances, *virtue* may upon the whole be said to *suffer*, and *wickedness* to be *triumphant*. And considering in how great a degree, the difference that there really is between good and bad men, with respect to happiness and misery, springs from *the belief of a future state*; how frequently it happens, that there is no reward or punishment *seen*, much less a *full and equal* retribution; and that the *natural good and evil consequences* of virtue and vice are neither so remarkable in themselves, nor so *universal*, nor so *certain*, as, it may reasonably be expected, will support a *steady* inflexible integrity under discouragement and oppression, and *counter-balance* the strong allurements of worldly honour and pleasure; upon all these accounts, I say, we must either conclude, that there will be a state of more *impartial* retribution hereafter, or else, which I have shewn to be highly improbable, that God does not concern himself to make *any* difference between the righteous and the wicked, or at least not so *universally* or in such a *degree*, as to promote the grand design of rewards and punishments, maintaining and enforcing the practice of virtue, and giving



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XV.giving a check to corruption and *moral* disorder.\*

We may add, to strengthen the *probability* of a future state from the *wisdom* and *goodness* of God our supreme governor, the *moral* and *accountable* nature of man, the *confusion* and *disorder* and *promiscuous* distribution of good and evil in the present life, that it agrees, vastly better than the contrary supposition, with our general idea of the *excellency* of human nature, and the *greatness* and *extent* of its faculties. For upon taking an impartial survey of human life, under its present embarrassments and difficulties, can we really imagine that it is the *whole* of our being, the *only* state we are designed for? Can we reconcile our minds to the thought, that man, who is indu'd with such *noble* powers, and capable of such *vast* improvements, was intended by the great Creator to be confined to this *narrow* and *imperfect* scene of action? Does it seem agreeable to our notions of the infinite goodness of the Deity, to suppose that he was

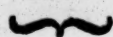
\* I know but of one thing more, that can invalidate any part of the argument contain'd in this discourse, and that is, 'tis *unnecessary* to assert a state of rewards for good men after death, because if we allow the future punishment of the wicked, that *alone* will make a *sufficient distinction* between them, and answer all the ends of the divine government. — But to this scheme there seems to be an *insuperable* objection, *viz.* that it supposes the *several* degrees of virtue to be *equally* rewarded, or rather *none* of them rewarded; nay, that those which are most *difficult*, attended with the *fewest* pleasures, and the *greatest* inconveniences, and are, withal, of *extraordinary* service to mankind, receive the *least* reward, *i. e.* in truth, are *discourag'd*, instead of being distinguish'd and honour'd. And whether it be possible to reconcile this to the ideas of *supreme wisdom and goodness*, or indeed to the *common principles of equity*, I leave to the judgment of all impartial inquirers.

made

made for no *higher end*, than to struggle and labour, for a short space, under the inconveniencies and miseries of this uncertain and troublesome world, and then to lose his existence? On the contrary, is he not, considered in this view, one of the most *unaccountable* parts of the creation; form'd with larger expectations and prospects than other animals are capable of, only to *disquiet* and *torment* him? Does he appear with that *honour* which is suitable to his character, as a being possess'd of such *superior* qualities, and made after the *image of God*? No, but as an *insignificant diminutive* creature, of very little consequence in the universe; a *mystery* in the course of providence, that it will ever confound and puzzle his reason to explain. Whereas, if we suppose that there is a state of much higher perfection, for which human nature is design'd, it will appear like itself, truly *great* and *excellent*. And if from the *nature* of things we may, as doubtless we may with *some* probability, guess at the *original scheme* of the Creator informing them; the *active* and *improveable* nature of the mind of man, which is so cramp'd and limited in its operations in the *present* state, speaks it to be intended for *another life*, where its faculties will be enlarged; and it will be employ'd in such exercises, and enjoy such pleasures, as are suited to its *importance* and *dignity*. Having laid before you, briefly, some of the *natural* evidences of a future state: I proceed to shew,

2dly, The advantages we receive from *Christianity*, with respect to this important principle; by which it will appear, that notwithstanding the *discoveries reason* may make, and the intimations



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we find of it in the writings of the *Old Testament*, it is reveal'd in a so much *plainer* and *stronger* manner, that it may, with a great propriety, be said to be *brought to light thro' the gospel*. Suffer me just to premise, that the assurances, which the Christian religion gives of a future life, are a strong presumption that our *natural reasonings* about it are *just* and *conclusive*. For as it appears in fact, that God is determined to dispense the rewards and punishments of virtue and vice hereafter, we may be assured, that this is *most agreeable* to the wisdom, goodness, and justice of his government; and consequently all our arguments for it, from his absolute perfection, and the consideration of him as the wise and righteous governor of mankind, from the powers of human nature, and the present scene of things, are hereby *corroborated* and *confirm'd*; and shewn not to be the wild suggestions of *fancy* and *enthusiasm*, but the sober dictates of *right reason*. However the advantages we receive by Christianity are still very *considerable*, and prove it in this respect, as well as others, to be of the greatest use and benefit to mankind. For

1<sup>st</sup>, By the Christian revelation we have a much stronger probability of *a future state in general*, than we could have by mere unassisted reason. The *natural probability* is exactly the same, as it would have been if there had been no revelation; and with this is join'd *another proof* of a *different* kind, as *strong* as the evidence we have for the truth of Christianity: These two proofs are not at all *inconsistent*; but the latter removes all the *uncertainty* that might attend the former, and greatly increases the evidence upon *the whole*; like two credible testimonies to the same fact, which *mutually* strengthen

strengthen and confirm each other. The testimony of *one* honest and capable witness, to the truth of a thing that fell within his own observation, may be thought *sufficient*; but the addition of *one* or *more* witnesses, of equal capacity and integrity, must render the probability more *full* and *unexceptionable*.

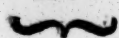
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Again, Christianity assures us of the *resurrection* of the body, (divested of all gross and animal principles, and in a state of glory and incorruption) to be a means of pleasure and happiness to the mind, which is a point that *reason* was absolutely in the dark about, and has given us *an instance in kind*, a glorious and uncontestable *specimen* of a resurrection and future life, in the resurrection of Christ. Then it not only establishes the *general notion* of a future existence, but asserts, in the strongest terms the soul's *immortality* and an *eternal* reward for the righteous, concerning which, tho' of the utmost consequence to the comfort of men's minds, and the cause of virtue, the dictates of reason are at best *imperfect* and *confus'd*. And tho' the *Jews* were favoured with a revelation from heaven, and therefore among them, one might justly expect clearer and fuller discoveries of *eternal life*; yet notwithstanding this, the law of *Moses* has nothing in it of this kind, but is enforced only by general assurances of the divine favour, and promises of *temporal* rewards; and there are very *sparing* intimations of a future *immortality*, even in the writings of the Prophets.

Add to all this, that the reward, which the Gospel proposes, is of the *noblest* kind, honourable to God, and worthy the excellent powers and capacities of human nature: It consists, under the



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continual influence of the divine presence and favour, in the perfection of *reason* and *purity*; is an *inheritance undefiled*, into which nothing of vice or misery shall enter; a state where *charity never faileth*, and, consequently, of eternal harmony and peace, and the most exalted social happiness; in which the *whole* human nature shall shine in its highest lustre and dignity, the spiritual part being compleatly *refin'd*, and fitted for the *sublimest* employments and pleasures, and the body so *adapted* to it, that instead of *cramping* the rational life, it shall rather *assist* its most enlarged operations.

I shall conclude all with this single remark, that if there are any here present, who are prejudic'd against the *Christian revelation*, on account of the clear discoveries it makes of a future state of rewards and punishments, they must be convinc'd, that they can reap but little advantage by rejecting *Christianity*, because the thing in general, how terrible soever it may appear, is a principle *the light of reason* dictates. Let it be allow'd, that the evidence for it amounts to no more than a good degree of *probability*, it ought however to determine the practice of every rational man — For what but *probability* is the chief spring of human actions? — Do not *credible* testimony, probable opinions and prospects, nay frequently *suspensions* and *remote* consequences and conjectures, influence all the affairs of the world; and direct men's conduct in cases of the last importance to *themselves*, their *families*, and *civil society*? — It ought therefore undoubtedly to decide in matters of religion, which is the most momentous of all our interests: And a man, in the opinion of every impartial spectator, would behave to the highest pitch of extravagance,

extravagance, who should act *against* probability, as he must do if he is not *determin'd* by it, when an eternity of happiness is depending. So that he who gives himself up to the gratification of irregular appetites, and a course of vice and impurity, can never be secure, even tho' he destroys the authority of the *Christian revelation*, unless he can also extinguish his *reason*, erase out of his mind all notions of a *Deity* and a *Providence*, and, consequently, subvert the principles of *natural religion* likewise.

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I have argu'd only upon the *supposition* that there are such persons, because to take it for *granted* that there are really any who are acted by this vile principle, and have such a degenerate and monstrous turn of mind, would be the greatest *affront* I could offer to this audience. For to say that a man is *prejudic'd* against what is the truest exaltation and happiness of his nature, is, in effect, to assert, that all remains of reason, all wise and good impressions, are totally lost and obliterated in him. He that can wish to die like a *brute*, can't have the *spirit* of a *man*; and there is no *baseness*, no *villainy*, but we may justly suppose him capable of. Besides, what do his notions *tend* to? — Do they raise the *value* of human nature, or improve its *happiness*? — Do they contribute to the regularity and order of *private life*, or the peace and welfare of *society*? — Will they make him at all more *useful* in the world, a more *faithful* friend, *tender* husband, *affectionate* and *careful* father, or more *industrious* and *honest* in his business? Quite the reverse of all this. — They *degrade* and *vilify* human nature; — raise none but *gloomy* and *horrid* ideas in a considerate mind; —



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and lead to *licentiousness* and *disorder*. Let us therefore thankfully cherish the glorious hopes, which the gospel affords, of *an immortal existence*, in which we shall enjoy the perfection of honour and happiness. Let us look on this state only as *preparatory* to our future more sublime and blissful life; and train ourselves up for it by cultivating our reason, and the practice of universal righteousness and virtue, I shall leave with you, to this purpose, the words of St. John, *Beloved, now are we the sons of God, and it doth not yet appear what we shall be: But we know, that when he shall appear,*  
<sup>1</sup> John iii. *we shall be like him; for we shall see him as he is.*  
<sup>2</sup> *And every man who hath this hope in him, purifieth himself, even as he is pure.*



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## S E R M O N XVI.

The nature, folly, and danger of  
scoffing at religion.

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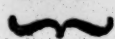
2 P E T. iii. 3.

*Knowing this first, that there shall come in  
the last days scoffers, walking after their  
own lusts.*

**A** Discourse on this subject can need no apo- S E R M.  
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logy with any one that knows the world, and has observed what open attempts have been made (and conducted sometimes with a great deal of art and subtilty) not only to disgrace and undermine *revelation*, but *natural religion* itself; and propagate such *base, unworthy, and groveling* sentiments of human nature, as have a direct tendency to root out of men's minds every principle of honour and ingenuity, and destroy the very foundation of all good morals. Some there are, even among our selves, who endeavour to *palliate* and *soften* the vilest enormities, resolve the whole obligation of morality into *political contrivance*, and, with the scoffers mention'd by St. *Peter*, deride the *future judgment* of mankind, a  
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state of rewards and punishments after death, as an *idle, romantic, visionary* scene, invented for the greater security of civil government, and supported by enthusiasm; and thus would fain banter us out of the two highest privileges of our reasonable nature, our *virtue*, and our *immortality*. I speak not these things for the sake of declaiming on the *looseness* and *degeneracy* of the times, or with a view to represent the *present* as more corrupt than *former* ages, in almost all of which, there have been some profess'd advocates for vice and licentiousness; but only to shew how necessary it is, that we should each of us, in our several stations, endeavour to put a stop to the *progress* of this evil, which seems rather to be prevailing than losing ground amongst us, and has been long complain'd of by all those, who have had a just concern for the honour of human nature, and the happiness of the world. To contribute my part towards it, and not to give *hard names*, or raise an abhorrence of any *particular characters*, farther than it is necessary to serve the cause of truth, was my sincere intention in composing this discourse: In which I shall

- I. Consider the nature, folly, and danger of the crime mentioned in the text.
- II. Inquire into the causes of it. And,
- III. Conclude with some suitable reflections.

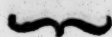
I. I am to consider the nature, folly, and danger of the crime mentioned in my text, *scoffing at religion*, than which nothing can be more offensive and shocking to a considerate mind. It must indeed be own'd, that religion has had the misfortune

tune to be monstrously *perverted* and *misrepresented*, and that the most absurd and incredible doctrines, the wildest enthusiasm, and even such principles and practices as strike at the root of all morality, have been urg'd and impos'd under that *sacred* and *venerable* name. And undoubtedly it must be a laudable design, and of great service to mankind, to expose these gross corruptions, by which the *native* excellency and beauty of religion is quite defac'd, and its usefulness intirely destroy'd. However, even establish'd and popular superstitions are not be treated with *rudeness* and *scurrility*, but *calmly argued* against. For there is a decent respect due to the *religion* of a country, as well as to its *laws* and *manners*; and he, who instead of *reasoning* against particular errors, takes upon him to *revile*, and treat in a *ludicrous* way, what all round him have the highest value for, shews himself to be an absolute stranger to the common rules of civility, — and ought, to be *despis'd* for his *insolence*. Besides, *religious* prejudices are, of all others, the most stubborn and inveterate; and, therefore, whoever attempts to reform them, if he knows any thing of human nature, will proceed with *discretion* and *gentleness*; and not in a *harsh, insulting* method, which must naturally irritate and inflame the passions, and render the prejudices of those whom he opposes yet more incurable. And all judicious inquirers will make a difference between religion as it is *in itself*, and as it has suffer'd by *accidental abuses*: For the former may, in every part of it, be rational, and highly beneficial, tho' the latter should be allow'd to be absurd, unnatural, and hurtful; and, by necessary consequence, it may be an argument of a discerning mind, and both

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both an honourable and useful undertaking, to endeavour to put a stop to the growth of *enthusiasm* and *superstition*, but unworthy a man, or a good member of society, to banter *religion*.

I am inclin'd to treat such scoffers *decently*, and shall therefore suppose them capable of sober reflection: And taking this for granted, I would desire them to ask themselves impartially, whether there be any thing in true religion that is *really* ridiculous? To begin with the grand principles of natural religion. Is there any thing *ridiculous* in the belief of a Deity, a supreme, infinite, and intelligent mind, the creator and governor of the universe? Or is it more agreeable to *reason* to suppose, that the whole system of the world, which appears in fact to be subject to innumerable variations, is eternal and necessarily existent? Or that the regular, beautiful, and useful frame of nature, in every part of which there is display'd the most surprizing and curious workmanship, was jumbled together by chance, and not form'd by a wise cause? Is it *absurd* to assert, that he who made the world exercises an universal providence, and directs all the affairs of it; or that the first cause of all things is absolutely perfect, and, in a particular manner, the governor of the rational and moral creation, to whom he has given laws, and whom he has made by nature accountable? And upon allowing his absolute perfection and government of the world, what is there *ludicrous* in any of the duties of piety, in a supreme reverence and love of him, and humble submission to the wisdom and authority of his providence, in celebrating his glorious excellencies, adoring his goodness, and acknowledging our constant dependance upon

upon him? What is there that has a *ridiculous aspect*, or can excite any but *the laughter of fools*, in justice, temperance, probity, universal benevolence; in a strict inflexible integrity, and a disinterested, generous concern for the public welfare? And if in all these most essential principles and duties of religion there be nothing *wild* and *extravagant*, nothing *weak* and *trifling*, nothing, on the contrary, but what is truly *venerable*, *sublime* and *useful*, he that endeavours to make a jest of them must render himself *contemptible*; and gives certain proof either of the *weakness* of his understanding, or of the *depravity* and *wickedness* of his heart.

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Again, is it at all *unsuitable* to our most worthy and honourable notions of God to believe, that when the world was universally corrupted, and over-run with ignorance, superstition, and vice, and both the knowledge and practice of the religion of nature were, in a great measure, lost, he would graciously interpose for the good of his creatures, and teach them their duty by an *extraordinary* revelation? Or to assert, that the person, who was commission'd to accomplish this most desirable end, wrought miracles to prove his authority, engage the *attention* of mankind, and counterballance their *prejudices*? Is it in the least *irrational* to suppose, that this revelation has fix'd, with the utmost distinctness, the terms of our acceptance with God, and thereby remov'd *distracting* suspicions, and *superstitious* terrors; and promis'd a *greater* reward, even an *eternity* of happiness, a *greater* reward, I say, for the encouragement of virtue, than could be expected, with any good degree of probability, on the principles of natural



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ral reason? Or finally, that besides *the law of nature* reviv'd, it would enjoin two or three *positive* duties (guarding, in the strictest manner possible against all *weak* and *dangerous* abuses of them) which are evidently calculated to enforce the eternal rules of morality, and a most exact and scrupulous regard to every branch of substantial and useful virtue?

It is possible, indeed, by an *unfair representation* to make any thing appear ridiculous, be it ever so rational in itself, or of ever so much importance to the happiness of mankind. The putting *false colours* upon it, nay only the giving it an *odd name*, will have this effect with the thoughtless and inconsiderate part of the world. Thus rigid justice may be call'd *singularity* and *preciseness*; — acts of disinterested benevolence and generosity *romantic heroism*; — and the love of God *enthusiasm*. In like manner the being *immers'd* in water, or eating bread, or drinking wine, — if it be describ'd as an essential part of religion in itself, without a reference to its moral use, — or as a charm, of I know not what mysterious and incomprehensible efficacy, — or as an atonement for an immoral conduct, — may well be reputed *weak* and *childish*. But when the *abuse* is discovered upon an impartial examination, and it is clearly seen, that the ridiculer has only diverted himself and others with his own *ignorance* or *wilful misconstruction*; wise and sober men must think very meanly of such a practice, and be surpriz'd to find it prevail in any companies, that have a concern for their own *honour*, and profess a regard, I need not say to *truth* and *virtue*, but to *common sense* and *decency*.

Further,

Further, the grand principles and duties of religion are so far from having any thing *ridiculous* in them, that they are some of the *plainest* and most *obvious* dictates of reason, and there are no truths that, when justly represented, sooner approve themselves to the unprejudiced judgment of mankind; which renders the *guilt* of the scoffer much more aggravated, and his *impertinence* and *folly* more insupportable. This is notorious with respect to the being and providence of God, and the intrinsic excellency and immutable authority of the rules of virtue, which no one can bring himself in earnest to oppose, without offering great violence to the reason of his mind. And as to *Christianity* in particular, since it is the noblest improvement of morality and natural religion, and *so far* recommends itself; since all its *peculiar* doctrines are consistent and credible; since the author of this most rational and beneficial scheme was a perfect pattern of *innocence*, open, generous, and humble, free from every appearance of *ambition* and *craft*, and gave the most convincing proofs of his being sent from God, by numerous and unquestionable miracles; *real* miracles, above the *known* powers of nature or art, nay, probably, above any powers communicated or allow'd to *created* agents; miracles *publicly* perform'd, and on *vast multitudes* at once, and on *sudden emergencies*, where there could be no suspicion of a concerted fraud; and, generally, most *useful* miracles, which were not mere ostentations of the superiour power and wisdom, but demonstrated likewise the goodness of their author; upon these accounts, I say, it may justly be asserted, with respect to the *Christian revelation*  
in



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in particular, that it deserves the approbation of impartial inquirers, or at least to be oppos'd with *modesty* and *respect*; and that to decide against it *confidently*, and treat it with *rudeness* and *contempt*, notwithstanding all these plausible circumstances, and strong presumptions of its truth and divinity, is *weakness* and *insolence*.

Let me only add, that religion is of the utmost consequence to the comfort of men's minds, the peace of society, and the general good of the world. What, for instance, can be a more *pleasing* reflection, than to consider ourselves, and the whole universe, as under the conduct of a being of unerring wisdom, inflexible justice, and unlimited goodness? On the contrary, if we discard the notion of a Deity and a providence, we can have none but *dark* and *gloomy* prospects; our happiness or misery being to be determined either by a *blind, random chance*, or by *fix'd and irrevocable fate*? Again, what can be more *honourable* to human nature, than the notion of a future immortal existence, in which our rational faculties will be *refin'd* and *enlarg'd*; or what stronger motive to the practice of virtue, which has a necessary and inseparable connexion both with *private* and *social* happiness; or more powerful dissuasive from vice, which tends to the corruption and misery of *individuals*, and the dissolution and ruin of *public communities*? And if we suppose that the distinction between virtue and vice is only imaginary, and has no foundation in reason and nature; has not this a most direct tendency to introduce *all manner of confusion*? Upon this scheme societies would be so far from being happy, that they could *scarce subsist*: For if the exercise

ercise of the social virtues was regarded as a <sup>S E R M.</sup> mere matter of *private convenience*, the greatest <sup>XVI.</sup> *strength* and *security* of civil government would be destroy'd: So that whoever sets himself to vilify these important truths, and represent them in a ridiculous light, not only fixes certain *reproach* and *infamy* upon himself, by *misplacing* his ridicule on what has really nothing absurd in it; he not only shews himself to be a *slight* and *careless* observer, that never examin'd to the bottom of things; but is, in fact, whatever his intention may be, whether to gratify a *trifling* humour, display the *forwardness* of his genius, or corrupt the *morals* of the age, an enemy to *society* and the *general happiness* of mankind \*.

And as the *guilt* of these scoffers is very great, their *danger* is in proportion. For if the principles of religion should happen to be *true* (and the *vainest* and most *confident* unbeliever won't, surely, pretend to prove that this is *impossible*) he that has so *monstrously* abus'd his reason, that noblest gift of God, as to employ it against his maker, and all that is amiable and useful in human life, must expect to be treated with the utmost *rigour* and *severity*. Having consider'd, thus

\* I would not be understood, by this, to insinuate, that even such persons ought to be punished by the civil power. On the contrary, as *these enemies* may be entirely defeated by *reason*, and the mischief they are capable of doing prevented, 'tis my firm belief that *forcible methods* are altogether *unnecessary* and must, of consequence, be extremely *dangerous*. For the allowing the magistrate to interpose in matters of *opinion*, where there is no *direct* violation of the peace of the society, only for fear of *remote* and *possible* consequences (of which he must be the sole and absolute judge) will lay a foundation for all manner of *violence* and *persecution*.

largely,



S E R M. largely, the nature, folly, and danger of *scoffing*  
XVI. at religion: I proceed to the

2<sup>d</sup> Thing propos'd, which was to enquire into the causes of it. These causes are *various*.

It sometimes springs from a *levity* of mind, which disposes men to treat all subjects *ludicrously*. Instances of this kind must have fallen, more or less, under every one's observation; I mean of persons, who are incapable of *cool* and *sedate* reflection, and so fond of a *jest*, that they can't help giving way to it on the most *solemn* occasions. They are profess'd enemies to all that is grave and manly, and therefore treat *religion*, as well as their *friends*, and those to whom they are under the highest obligations, with the utmost *freedom* and *impertinence*.

Again, bantering religion frequently proceeds from *ignorance* and *superficial inquiry*. 'Tis an excellent remark of a most ingenious author, that "a little philosophy disposes men's minds to *Atheism*." \* Because they understand not the works of nature, their admirable composition, and various uses, they *grow* prophane and *sceptical*; and are apt to urge their own *mistakes*, arising from the shallowness and confusion of their understandings, as so many *defects* and *blemishes* in the constitution of the universe: They have just sense enough to *cavil*, but not to *discern* and *display* the glories of the creation, and the amazing wisdom and goodness of the creator. And it is for want of a right knowledge of *human nature*, and of the *fitness* and *beauty* of actions and characters, that so many attempts have been made to

\* Lord Bacon.

confound virtue and vice, and destroy the obligations of morality.

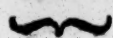
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But this cause of scoffing is most notorious with respect to *reveal'd* religion: The *inconsistences* of party-schemes, the *dreams* of bewilder'd enthusiasts, the *innovations* and *corruptions* of weak superstitious, and designing men, are blended with the *original* doctrines of Christianity, in order to render it ridiculous. The *frauds*, *impositions*, and *persecutions* of dishonest, proud, tyrannical priests are objected to the very religion that *condemns* them; which, upon this account, is all represented as the effect of *priestcraft*, combin'd with the cunning of *statesmen* and *politicians*, with a view to inflame and impoverish the rest of mankind. Consult the writings of the enemies of Christianity, or join in their conversations, and you will find, that the *shrewdest*, most *popular*, and constant invectives turn upon such topics as these; which evidently proves that they are not always very *exact* and *careful* in their religious inquiries, that they proceed on *false* principles, and censure what they have no *just idea* of, and are not quite free even from that *prejudice* and *implicit faith*, which they loudly disclaim for themselves, but are so forward to charge upon others.

Sometimes again, it happens, that the *fashion* of the age they live in, or the *general humour* of the company they frequent, makes persons set up for *scoffers*. To give themselves a *genteel* air, and acquire a character for *politeness*, they are induc'd to deride all religion, if the genius of their company be so *bold* and *unconfined*, or if it be more *moderate*, only revelation. At other times the same effect may be ascrib'd to *vanity*. Men are desirous to *distinguish* their names; or fond of displaying



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displaying their *wit*, and talent at *ridicule*. Whereas, in truth, there is no *wit* at all in *misrepresenting* things, but rather a strong presumption of *ignorance* and *stupidity*; and when any proceed so far, as to make a jest of God and his providence, to plead for the privilege of dying like brutes, and banter the obligations of virtue, which are a law to all intelligent beings, such a conduct is a certain proof, that reason is, in a great measure, *extinguish'd*, and the mind lost to all *good* and *generous* impressions.

But this leads me to observe, in the last place, that scoffing at religion may, in some persons, proceed from a *direct hatred* of it, occasioned by a prejudice in favour of their vices. This was the case of the *scoffers* mentioned in the text, who are expressly describ'd as *walking after their own lusts*. To this likewise, our Saviour imputed the ill treatment he met with, from the principal men of the *Jewish* nation. I shall not pretend to determine, that it is, *always*, the cause of infidelity in the present age; because I make no doubt but mens judgments may be *unhappily* perverted, even in points of great importance, where there is, in general, an *honest* temper and habit of mind. This however I may safely venture to assert, that vice and immorality in the practice is the source of the *stoutest* and most *invincible* prejudices against religion; and that there is an *immediate connexion* between a wicked irregular life and *bating* the truth, nay, *opposing* the truth with the utmost *bitterness* and *virulence*. Suffer me to pursue this observation a little, which is of great consequence in *morals*, and will serve very much to illustrate the subject before us.

How

How natural is it for those, who live *as without* SERMON.  
*God in the world*, to *wish* that there was no such XVI.  
being, that by destroying the first principle of  
all religion, they may justify the want of it in  
their practice: Or if the proofs of his existence  
are so evident and uncontestable, as not to be dis-  
puted, much less suppress'd, the next thing they  
are inclined to believe is, that there is no *provi-*  
*dence*; and if they can satisfy themselves in this  
point, they get rid of the troublesome notion of  
an *inspector* and *judge* of their actions, and are  
left to follow, *freely*, the bent of their licentious  
inclinations. A principal part of God's provi-  
dential government, if there be any such thing,  
is the government of *moral agents*, which, as it  
supposes that they are under a *law*, supposes like-  
wise that they are *accountable* beings, and will be  
*rewarded*, or *punish'd*, according to their obedi-  
ence, or disobedience to that law; and this future  
state of *retribution*, we may reasonably imagine,  
wicked men can't bear the thought of, because  
it fills the mind with confusion and terror, and  
spoils the relish of their sensual enjoyments; and,  
of consequence, they must be enemies to the no-  
tion of God's *governing providence*, from whence  
it is so directly *inferred*. And farther, when per-  
sons act as if there was no eternal law or rule of  
*right*, making their irregular appetites the sole  
guide and measure of their conduct, they are *un-*  
*avoidably determin'd to wish* that virtue and vice  
were but *empty* names, the invention of the *crafty*  
and *politic* to keep the world in subjection, and  
impose on their ignorance and credulity; and that  
the distinction between moral good and evil was  
merely *arbitrary*, and did not spring from the  
immutable *reason* of things. So that a wicked  
S 2 life



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life has a manifest tendency to beget a *dislike* of the great principles of *natural religion*, and inclines the mind to *question* their truth and authority. But because *Christianity* has fully establish'd the notion of a providence, and most clearly explain'd, confirm'd, and improv'd moral obligations, and declar'd the certainty of future rewards and punishments; and as these things stand in this divine revelation, they are not so liable to be *disputed* and *perplex'd* as mere natural reasonings; it is no wonder if persons of corrupt dispositions and ungovern'd appetites take *particular* offence at *that*, since so long as the truth of our holy religion is unquestion'd, they can enjoy no *peace* or *security* in their vices.

I shall only add, that when men are *averse* to the principles of religion, they will naturally *decline* all farther enquires into the reasonableness of them, and be *fond* of every thing that looks *plausible* on the side of infidelity. And the objections they have gathered together against religion, will soon appear to the view of their passions and prejudices, which give an *unnatural* turn to all objects, and never present them in their just *proportion*, very *great* and *considerable*: On the contrary, the arguments for it will lose all their *force*, and be esteem'd *weak* and *trifling*. Till, at length, by this monstrous way of *imagining*, instead of *reasoning*, they work themselves into a fix'd persuasion, that there is nothing at all in religion; and acquire *an habit of thinking* somewhat like a *principle*, that there is not in nature any solid foundation of virtue. And when they have thus conquer'd their *scruples*, or rather silenc'd the voice of natural conscience, suppress'd their sense of the difference of good and evil, and *perverted* their reason, to  
render

render it *subservient* and *compliant* to their passions, they are easily led on to make *violent* and *spiteful* attacks upon religion, and use their utmost cunning and sophistry to undermine it. This is the *deplorable* but too *evident* connexion between vicious habits and opposing the truth; till it settles, at last, in *rancour* and *malice* against it.

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What has been said, in the foregoing discourse, suggest several useful reflections. We learn from it,

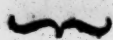
1<sup>st</sup>. Into what *extreme corruption* the mind of man, which is indu'd with such noble faculties, and form'd for Godlike perfection, is capable of being sunk, even to mistake *confusion* for *order*, and *deformity* for *beauty*; to have its reason employ'd as an *advocate* for *vice*, to paint it in *agreeable* colours, and set off the *shame* and *misery* of human nature with false and delusive charms; and in vilifying *religion*, and representing it as *ridiculous* and *unnatural*; *religion*, which is our chief honour and dignity, the only source of inward satisfaction, and the basis and support of social happiness, and which affords such ravishing prospects with respect to another life, as must make the most admir'd and envied scenes of worldly glory, pleasure, and luxury, appear mean and despicable.

Again, that we may not be impos'd on by the scoffers of our own times, let us always take care to distinguish between *reasoning* and *ridicule*. There may indeed be reason in *ridicule*, but I believe it will generally be found, that there is a greater proportion of *falsehood* and *misrepresentation*. When therefore we are attack'd this way, as there is just ground for *suspicion*, we should examine



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amine nicely what it is that is *really* ridiculous ; whether it be religion itself, or something of a different nature substituted in the place of it : The latter of these we may be satisfy'd will appear to be the case ; for religion can't suffer by being *scrutiniz'd* any way, tho' our judgment concerning it may be debauch'd and corrupted. Of this indeed there will be but little danger, while we follow the method above recommended ; otherwise, we may be banter'd out of our *senses*, and have no security against the most *dangerous delusions*.

Finally, that we may keep at the utmost distance from the crime mention'd in the text, let us imploy our reason in *defending* religion, and representing it in a *just* and *amiable* light. Let our *natural abilities* be devoted to this service, and all our *studies* and *improvements* made subservient to it. For the understanding and wit of man can't be more *suitably* or *honourably* exercis'd, than in describing virtue in its proper beauty and lustre, and stripping vice of those artificial ornaments, which hide its natural horror and infamy ; than in recommending justice, truth, and benevolence, and exposing the mischiefs of ungovern'd passions ; than in tracing the footsteps of God's stupendous wisdom and unbounded goodness in the works of creation, the conduct of providence, and the wonderful scheme of our redemption. These are such *refin'd* and *exalted* speculations, as must always be our *noblest* entertainment, while we continue possess'd of rational faculties. By pursuing this design we act in *concert* with the infinite wisdom of God, and the reason of all good spirits above us ; do the *best offices* we are capable of

of to mankind; and for improving, in so worthy a manner, that *great* talent, which is the most *distinguishing* excellency of our nature, shall receive peculiar marks of approbation and esteem from the supreme and almighty being, who is the *lover* and *rewarder* of virtue. To him be glory for ever. *Amen.*

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*F I N I S.*





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